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TALENTS . . .

The other children on the block were older than I. Paul could spit around corners and was getting on in years. He was in sixth grade and Glen was in fifth, with better ears than an owl. Elinor had no hair on her head and we called her chromedome, though Mrs. Schonhaften bought her new wigs every September, brown for school, blonde for Sunday and red for special occasions. You did not call her chromedome unless you were close to sanctuary, because she could run like a shadow. . . .

"Car turning the corner," said Elinor.

Glen said, "It's Mrs. Haneau. The power steering makes that wheedledee noise. She's been shopping because I can hear the bran flakes in the box and the beer sloshing in the cans." His ears stuck out a little but not much, and he could hear worms going to bed at night. I had given up envying him. . . .

—from *Merlin Street*, by W. Macfarlane

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INFINITY FOUR

EDITED BY ROBERT HOSKINS

LANCER BOOKS



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A LANCER BOOK

INFINITY FOUR

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Introduction

The Future of the Future

There is a revolution going on about us—a revolution now a third of a century old. And it shows no sign of coming to an early close, of the opposing forces accommodating themselves to the inevitable, of a stable situation surplanting a chaotic one.

The revolution is in publishing, and may be said to date from the appearance of the first paperbound Pocket Book, in 1939. There was nothing new about the idea of inexpensive editions of books; the first paperbacks appeared shortly after the Civil War. They were nothing more than a standard book, printed on cheaper paper, and bound in paper covers rather than in boards. They were popular for awhile, but cutthroat competition forced the publishers of these paperbacks into a disastrous price war; by the end of the 1880's they had disappeared from the publishing scene.

Books have always been a high-priced item, too expensive for the great masses of the people. That is why public libraries were established, first as philanthropies and later as community duty; millions of readers could avail themselves of the treasures of world literature that otherwise would be unattainable.

The idea of a book priced cheap enough so that any workingman could afford it seemed a natural, and the new firm was an almost instant success. World War II

hindered the infant industry, but by the time the 1950's arrived paperbacks were a growing force. Indeed, within a few years they had become dominant in the industry. And with their success, their dominance, came an unfortunate side effect: the death of the all-fiction and general interest magazine.

True, there are all-fiction magazines being published today—at this writing there are six science fiction magazines, three in the mystery field, and one western. The combined circulation of all totals approximately 600,000 copies of each issue—and that assumes that there is no reader overlap. In truth, there may be a total of 300,000 people in this country who more or less regularly buy one of the category all-fiction magazines.

That translates to a figure of one in every seven hundred people in the country.

The general interest magazines have also entered a decline that may be likened to death: the magazine industry today is an industry of the specialized book, appealing to a limited audience. Those limits may be large: consider *Playboy's* circulation of approximately six million . . .

Ten times as great at the total sale of all of the category fiction magazines.

Why the recitation of increasingly depressing statistics? you ask. Well, those figures tell us that fiction, and particularly the short story as a form, is in serious trouble. Time was when a beginning writer could practice his craft in a field that offered literally hundreds of markets for his stories. Over the past quarter-century the short story writer has seen these markets almost disappear. Even the magazines that still do use short stories (frequently no more than one an issue) are much fewer in number than before—witness the disappearance of all of the great weeklies: *Liberty*, *Collier's*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

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The great demand now is for novels. But a novel makes demands of its own on the writer; it is a difficult form—juggling a multiplicity of characters and events to make them come out in a balanced form takes practice. But where is the writer to practice, if the markets for the short story are slowly disappearing?

Science fiction readers are lucky in one respect: they have 60 per cent of the category fiction titles devoted to their own interest (though woefully much less than 50 per cent of the circulation). But there is another area of short fiction publishing, and here science fiction is once again ahead of the general interest field: that is the original anthology, the book that uses only new stories in its contents. The first of the new generation of these anthology series was Damon Knight's *Orbit* (Frederik Pohl's *Star Science Fiction* was ten years ahead of the field, and perhaps should be considered as another in the booming s-f markets of the mid-fifties); now we have Terry Carr's *Universe*, Robert Silverberg's *New Dimensions*, Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* and of course this the fourth volume of *Infinity*. There have also been a number of one-shot efforts that have not as yet developed into series, although several such have been tentatively announced.

All of these series welcome the new writer, and indeed encourage him perhaps above the call of simple duty. First time authors appearing in the first three *Infinity*'s include George Zebrowski, Michael Fayette, Pat De Graw, Anthony Weller, and in this issue, Tom Pickens and E. Michael Blake. Several of them have proven their ability by repeat sales to other anthologies, and to the magazines.

As the magazine field becomes more and more specialized, it seems logical that other areas in fiction will open to the original book anthology. It's all part of that revolution that is now a third of a century old. And that revolu-

tion shows every sign of continuing on into the foreseeable future. It's certain that book publishing will see changes that now may seem drastic; one of these will almost certainly be the gradual disappearance of the boundary between hard and softcover publishing. Many old and established hardcover firms are now planning paperback lines of their own; one knowledgeable source in the field predicts that within twenty years there will no longer be such a thing as a hardcover bestseller, or even a category line. The only hardcover books may be coffee table items, art books, gift books, and the like. The bestsellers will be published first in paperback. (Even libraries are turning to the paperback as a way of stretching their book purchase budgets.)

That means that the reader can unhappily look forward to constantly rising prices. A few special gift paperbacks have already been priced at \$2.95 and \$3.95, but it may well come that such a price will be near standard for the highly promoted bestseller. The category item, though, with its more limited market, will remain much lower in price, readily available to the individual who wishes to find his entertainment in sources other than from the public airwaves.

The magazine field will continue in its trend toward specialization, and it may be that the fiction magazine will finally go the way of the dodo. But if it does, the paperback anthology is there to take up the slack. Every fan of s-f of course hopes that our favorite field will continue as a healthy exception to the generally pessimistic trend in fiction, and one way to support that health is to support the magazines and original anthologies.

S-f has many times predicted the evolving of communications beyond the form of the book and the magazine. While I personally hope that this will never come about, I am very glad to be involved in the publishing industry

Introduction

at this particular time, both as an editor and as a writer. It looks like it's going to continue to be a very interesting revolution.

Robert Hoskins

Owned by a pair of Siamese, I find it easy to empathize with those who think the planet is going to the dogs . . .

The Bump

FRITZ LEIBER

Pursuing came that dreadful, horrendous, moron BOW-WOW. Why should the apartment next door have such a maniac? A poodle, a fox terrier, a Saint Bernard, even a bloodhound or German Shepherd would have been preferable. I controlled my prejudices, which are pretty strong, and looked around. A Doberman Pinscher, next door it had to be, emblem of fascism.

All my underclothes were on the floor except for those which, perchance, I was wearing. Kim, the darling, had been busy. He had cleaned out the two top drawers in the dresser of my one-room apartment. He loves me, no question, and also is something of a fetishist. Though that's odd, since his species doesn't wear clothes. Oh well, maybe he's a sweat fetishist.

Clawing with his claws, he'd opened those two top drawers. And then dragging with his paws—he is never a cat to damage things, except occasionally me out of pure if savage affection—he had drawn out all the lingerie. Queer karma for a cat—probably he's the reincarnation of a dirty old man. Or a dirty young one. Born under the sign of Leo, anyhow, as I've calculated. Cats such as Kim have a nicety about such matters as their birthday.

But no real strategy or tactics, at least toward the one they love. Just as now, guiltily but most conspicuously, Kim had hidden, snaking shrewdly, under the blanket of

my bed. Because of which behavior he has a second name: The Bump. He really looks quite comic, innocently bulging under the blanket like six or so bananas. But I'd never tell him that. Until they are completely empathized and instructed—something impossible until they are older than Kim—cats are extremely sensitive, outrageously touchy. Much more so than dogs, who take out their sensitivity by fawning, slavish, "Please beat me" behavior—the master masochists of the universe. But never cats, who were very aristocratic Gods in their day—Egyptian Bast, etc. And they somehow keep living up to it, even now when the uninstructed ones are speechless. A long-enduring breed with a high resistance to mutation.

Such were my thoughts as I took off my coat, dress, shoes, silk tights, and underclothes, tossing the last in the pile Kim the Bump had made. Stripping down to my own short, scanty, red-gold hair. I really am a sentimentalist and after all Kim and I are, from quite away back, comrades, buddies, chums. He even goes to the movies with me, quiet as a mouse inside my coat—though God knows what he sees in them—they're just one (and about the dullest) of my anthropological assignments.

About that time, Fatimah waddled out of the bathroom. She—Kim's mother—can do a four-foot vertical jump, but being fifteen years old and rather overweight, she never demonstrates this amazing ability to spectators, except in cases of utter emergency. Or when, rarely, her mind wanders. Then she jumps five feet. She is completely empathized and instructed. She is, poor dear, somewhat senile, but being ladies we understand each other perfectly. After all, I empathized and instructed her. We are friends—and Kim too, except he's a beatnik, poor dog-type cat. Out of Siam. Whence strange things come, I gather.

Kim, the Bump, bit my ankle quite deeply—a sign that I was going to have to make a star decision quite soon.

The Bump

Although unempathized and uninstructed, Kim the Bump is strong on instinct.

Fatimah glanced at Kim, but did not approach him. He has an Oedipus Complex (as they call it on this planet) to astound Oedipus (some fabulous ancient Greek whom Sophocles—another ancient Greek—damn the bunch of them!) wrote about interminably. Anyhow, Fatimah kept well away from Kim. Which habit may well have given her stability, her four-footedness on reality. Kim has never been out of this room all his life. Unlike Fatimah, who was out her first three years. I imagine Kim thinks of this room as the universe, with everything else—seen through the windows, spied through the door—illusion. (Sometimes he does run out of the door down the hall, but it is red-carpeted and he likely thinks of it as Hell. Window-Heaven with its swift, bird-painted illusions and Hall with its Human-haunted Hell.)

While I was wondering these things, I was looking at my naked, bony, six-foot body in the ceiling-to-floor, whorehouse type mirror—the only extravagance I permit myself on this planet. I have a feeling for the economies of Galaxy Center, if no one else has. My sign, like Kim's, is Leo. I come from a near-by sun. My gaze centered on my firm, flat breasts, with nipples large as big, narrowing strawberries. I was not in the least put down by the absence there of bulging milk-sacks. On this planet I have learned that many men go for just such a figure as mine—*Playboy* and the comics (so rightly named!) and doctors indoctrinated with breast-feeding to the contrary. Perhaps the men viewing me (and girls perchance, who knows?) desire something excitingly neuter. Hermaphrodites, etc.

Still, despite these interesting thoughts, I was getting awfully sick of Terra, as those afore-mentioned ancient Greeks called it, who were about the best folk on the whole orb, past or present, I'd judge. Since then it's been a typical case (let me snooze my nose) of recession, de-

generation, and plain "Let's go to Hell" business. Even the Greeks, in their own country, have become a bunch of incredible, torturing no-goods. More sadistic even than Kim, who just bit my ankle again. Ah, well, it's all okay. Fatimah is all set to send the sub-ether message to Galaxy Center from her sub-station. Under the incredibly floor-cluttered lowest table. Oh, what a mess! We cats are most neat about our excretia and bodies (just now I'm licking my somewhat scanty short red fur). But nothing else—confusion entire! Except perhaps our thoughts. Still, I'm not certain about those. They may be all mixed up.

The blue light sparked (I had drawn the curtains, shutting out hateful Sol) and I dictated to Fatimah while Kim crouched in a dark corner (I've taught Fatimah Galaxy Center Code and I'm a lazy one), "Scrub this planet, as far as feline migration is concerned. It's dog, dog, dog, dog, dog, dog, dog. No place—no hidey-holes even—for individuality. At the least, 43 per cent dog, or 1, 111, 110, or even 99 percent, as they call it on this slavish, flattering, ultimately always doggy, forever decimal planet. Unless you answer in two minutes (their time), I'll off to Mars (fourth planet, Sol, their war-god name), though I gather it's a washout too. *Men* have been there. And on their moon too.

"Incidentally," I said, "I'm taking Fatimah and Kim with me—their names, our people. Our kind, though partial-primitive. If there's anything a cat is, it's self-willed—and most whimsical."

Kim, the Bump, bit my ankle a third time.

Today's newspaper is service oriented, offering its readers a necessary and non-varying record of our daily ephemerae. But does the same hold true for tomorrow's newspaper—when received today?

What We Learned from This Morning's Newspaper

ROBERT SILVERBERG

1

I got home from the office as usual at 6:47 this evening and discovered that our peaceful street has been in some sort of crazy uproar all day. The newsboy it seems came by today and delivered *The New York Times* for Wednesday December 1 to every house on Redbud Crescent. Since today is Monday November 22 it follows therefore that Wednesday December 1 is the middle of next week. I said to my wife are you sure that this really happened? Because I looked at the newspaper myself before I went off to work this morning and it seemed quite all right to me.

At breakfast time the newspaper could be printed in Albanian and it would seem quite all right to you my wife replied. Here look at this. And she took the newspaper from the hall closet and handed it all folded up to me. It looked just like any other edition of *The New York Times* but now I saw what I had failed to notice at breakfast time, that it said Wednesday December 1.

Is today the 22nd of November I asked? Monday?

It certainly is my wife told me. Yesterday was Sunday and tomorrow is going to be Tuesday and we haven't even come to Thanksgiving yet. Bill what are we going to do about this?

I glanced through the newspaper. The front page headlines were nothing remarkable I must admit, just the

same old New York *Times* stuff that you get any day when there hasn't been some event of cosmic importance. NIXON, WITH WIFE, TO VISIT 3 CHINESE CITIES IN 7 DAYS. Yes. 10 HURT AS GUNMEN SHOOT WAY INTO AND OUT OF BANK. All right. GROUP OF 10, IN ROME, BEGINS NEGOTIATING REALIGNMENT OF CURRENCIES. Okay. The same old New York *Times* stuff and no surprises. But the paper was dated Wednesday December 1 and that was a surprise of sorts I guess.

This is only a joke I told my wife.

Who would do such a thing for a joke? To print up a whole newspaper? It's impossible Bill.

It's also impossible to get next week's newspaper delivered this week you know or hadn't you considered that I said?

She shrugged and I picked up the second section. I opened to page 50 which contained the obituary section and I admit I felt quite queasy for a moment since after all this might not be any joke and what would it be like to find my own name there? To my relief the people whose obituaries I saw were Harry Rogoff Terry Turner Dr. M.A. Feinstein and John Millis. I will not say that the deaths of these people gave me any pleasure but better them than me of course. I even looked at the death notices in small type but there was no listing for me. Next I turned to the sports section and saw KNICKS' STREAK ENDED, 110-109. We had been talking about going to get tickets for that game at the office and my first thought now was that it isn't worth bothering to see it. Then I remembered you can bet on basketball games and I knew who was going to win and that made me feel very strange. So also I felt odd to look at the bottom of page 64 where they had the results of the racing at Yonkers Raceway and then quickly flip flip flip I was on page 69 and the financial section lay before my eyes. DOW INDEX RISES BY 1.61 TO 881.34 the headline said. Na-

What We Learned from This Morning's Newspaper

tional Cash Register was the most active stock closing at 27 and three eighths off one fourth. Then Eastman Kodak 88 and seven eighths down 1 and one eighth. By this time I was starting to sweat very hard and I gave my wife the paper and took off my jacket and tie.

I said how many people have this newspaper?

Everybody on Redbud Crescent she said that's eleven houses altogether.

And nowhere beyond our street?

No the others got the ordinary paper today we've been checking on that.

Who's we I asked?

Marie and Cindy and I she said. Cindy was the one who noticed about the paper first and called me and then we all got together and talked about it. Bill what are we going to do? We have the stock market prices and everything Bill.

If it isn't a joke I told her.

It looks like the real paper doesn't it Bill?

I think I want a drink I said. My hands were shaking all of a sudden and the sweat was still coming. I had to laugh because it was just the other Saturday night some of us were talking about the utter predictable regularity of life out here in the suburbs the dull smooth sameness of it all. And now this. The newspaper from the middle of next week. It's like God was listening to us and laughed up His sleeve and said to Gabriel or whoever it's time to send those stuffed shirts on Redbud Crescent a little excitement.

2

After dinner Jerry Wesley called and said we're having a meeting at our place tonight Bill can you and your lady come?

I asked him what the meeting was about and he said it's about the newspaper.

Oh yes I said. The newspaper. What about the newspaper?

Come to the meeting he said I really don't want to talk about this on the phone.

Of course we'll have to arrange a sitter Jerry.

No you won't we've already arranged it he told me. The three Fischer girls are going to look after all the kids on the block. So just come over around quarter to nine.

Jerry is an insurance broker very successful at that he has the best house on the Crescent, two-story Tudor style with almost an acre of land and a big paneled rum-pus room in the basement. That's where the meeting took place. We were the seventh couple to arrive and soon after us the Maxwells the Bruces and the Thomasons came in. Folding chairs were set out and Cindy Wesley had done her usual great trays of canapes and such and there was a lot of liquor, self-service at the bar. Jerry stood up in front of everybody and grinned and said I guess you've all been wondering why I called you together this evening. He held up his copy of the newspaper. From where I was sitting I could make out only one headline clearly it was 10 HURT AS GUNMEN SHOOT WAY INTO AND OUT OF BANK but that was enough to enable me to recognize it as *the* newspaper.

Jerry said did all of you get a copy of this paper today?

Everybody nodded.

You know Jerry said that this paper gives us some extraordinary opportunities to improve our situation in life. I mean if we can accept it as the real December 1 edition and not some kind of fantastic hoax then I don't need to tell you what sort of benefits we can get from it, right?

Sure Bob Thomason said but what makes anybody think it isn't a hoax? I mean next week's newspaper who could believe that?

Jerry looked at Mike Nesbit. Mike teaches at Columbia Law and is more of an intellectual than most of us.

What We Learned from This Morning's Newspaper

Mike said well of course the obvious conclusion is that somebody's playing a joke on us. But have you looked at the newspaper closely? Every one of those stories has been written in a perfectly legitimate way. There aren't any details that ring false. It isn't like one of those papers where the headlines have been cooked up but the body of the text is an old edition. So we have to consider the probabilities. Which sounds more fantastic? That someone would take the trouble of composing an entire fictional edition of the *Times* setting it in type printing it and having it delivered or that through some sort of fluke of the fourth dimension we've been allowed a peek at next week's newspaper? Personally I don't find either notion easy to believe but I can accept fourth-dimensional hocus-pocus more readily than I can the idea of a hoax. For one thing unless you've had a team the size of the *Times'* own staff working on this newspaper it would take months and months to prepare it and there's no way that anybody could have begun work on the paper more than a few days in advance because there are things in it that nobody could have possibly known as recently as a week ago. Like the Phase Two stuff and the fighting between India and Pakistan.

But how could we get next week's newspaper Bob Thomason still wanted to know?

I can't answer that said Mike Nesbit. I can only reply that I am willing to accept it as genuine. A miracle if you like.

So am I said Tim McDermott and a few others said the same.

We can make a pile of money out of this thing said Dave Bruce.

Everybody began to smile in a strange strained way. Obviously everybody had looked at the stock market stuff and the racetrack stuff and had come to the same conclusions.

Jerry said there's one important thing we ought to find

out first. Has anybody here spoken about this newspaper to anybody who isn't currently in this room?

People said nope and uh-uh and not me.

Good said Jerry. I propose we keep it that way. We don't notify the *Times* and we don't tell Walter Cronkite and we don't even let our brother-in-law on Dogwood Lane know, right? We just put our newspapers away in a safe place and quietly do whatever we want to do about the information we've got. Okay? Let's put that to a vote. All in favor of stamping this newspaper top secret raise your right hand.

Twenty-two hands went up.

Good said Jerry. That includes the kids you realize. If you let the kids know anything they'll want to bring the paper to school for show and tell for Christ's sake. So cool it you hear?

Sid Fischer said are we going to work together on exploiting this thing or do we each act independently?

Independently said Dave Bruce.

Right independently said Bud Maxwell.

It went all around the room that way. The only one who wanted some sort of committee system was Charlie Harris. Charlie has bad luck in the stock market and I guess he was afraid to take any risks even with a sure thing like next week's paper. Jerry called for a vote and it came out ten to one in favor of individual enterprise. Of course if anybody wants to team up with anybody else I said there's nothing stopping anybody.

As we started to adjourn for refreshments Jerry said remember you only have a week to make use of what you've been handed. By the first of December this is going to be just another newspaper and a million other people will have copies of it. So move fast while you've got an advantage.

The trouble is when they give you only next week's paper you don't ordinarily have a chance to make a big killing in the market. I mean stocks don't generally go up 50 per cent or 80 per cent in just a few trading sessions. The really broad swings take weeks or months to develop. Still and all I figured I could make out all right with the data I had. For one thing there evidently was going to be a pretty healthy rally over the next few days. According to the afternoon edition of the *Post* that I brought home with me the market had been off seven on the 22nd, closing with the Dow at 803.15, the lowest all year. But the December 1 *Times* mentioned "a stunning two-day advance" and the average finished at 831.34 on the 30th. Not bad. Then too I could work on margin and other kinds of leverage to boost my return. We're going to make a pile out of this I told my wife.

If you can trust that newspaper she said.

I told her not to worry. When we got home from Jerry's I spread out the *Post* and the *Times* in the den and started hunting for stocks that moved up at least 10 per cent between Nov 22 and Nov 30. This is the chart I made up:

Stock	Nov 22 close	Nov 30 high
Levitz Furniture	89½	103¾
Bausch & Lomb	133¾	149
Natomas	45¾	57
Disney	99¾	116¾
E G & G	19¾	23¾

Spread your risk Bill I told myself. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Even if the newspaper was phony I couldn't get hurt too badly if I bought all five. So at 9:30 the next morning I phoned my broker and told him I

wanted to do some buying in the margin account at the opening. He said don't be in a hurry Bill the market's in lousy shape. Look at yesterday there were 201 new lows this market's going to be under 750 by Christmas. You can see from this that he's an unusual kind of broker since most of them will never try to discourage you from placing an order that'll bring them a commission. But I said no I'm playing a hunch I want to go all out on this and I put in buys on Levitz Bausch Natomas Disney and EG&G. I used the margin right up to the hilt and then some. Okay I told myself if this works out the way you hope it will you've just bought yourself a vacation in Europe and a new Chrysler and a mink for the wife and a lot of other goodies. And if not? If not you just lost yourself a hell of a lot of money Billy boy.

4

Also I made some use out of the sports pages.

At the office I looked around for bets on the Knicks vs. the SuperSonics next Tuesday at the Garden. A couple of guys wondered why I was interested in action so far ahead but I didn't bother to answer and finally I got Eddie Martin to take the Knicks by 11 points. Also I got Marty Felks to take Milwaukee by 8 over the Warriors that same night. Felks thinks Abdul-Jabbar is the best center the game ever had and he'll always bet the Bucks but my paper had it that the Warriors would cop it, 106-103. At lunch with the boys from Leclair & Anderson I put down \$250 with Butch Hunter on St. Louis over the Giants on Sunday. Next I stopped off at the friendly neighborhood Off Track Betting office and entered a few wagers on the races at Aqueduct. My handy guide to the future told me that the Double paid \$54.20 and the third Exacta paid \$62.20, so I spread a little cash on each. Too bad there were no \$2500 payoffs that day but you can't be picky about your miracles can you?

Tuesday night when I got home I had a drink and asked my wife what's new and she said everybody on the block had been talking about the newspaper all day and some of the girls had been placing bets and phoning their brokers. A lot of the women here play the market and even the horses though my wife is not like that, she leaves the male stuff strictly to me.

What stocks were they buying I asked?

Well she didn't know the names. But a little while later Joni Bruce called up for a recipe and my wife asked her about the market and Joni said she had bought Winnebago Xerox and Transamerica. I was relieved at that because I figured it might look really suspicious if everybody on Redbud Crescent suddenly phoned in orders the same day for Levitz Bausch Disney Natomas and EG&G. On the other hand what was I worrying about nobody would draw any conclusions and if anybody did we could always say we had organized a neighborhood investment club. In any case I don't think there's any law against people making stock market decisions on the basis of a peek at next week's newspaper. Still and all who needs publicity and I was glad we were all buying different stocks.

I got the paper out after dinner to check out Joni's stocks. Sure enough Winnebago moved up from 33 and one eighth to 38 and one eighth, Xerox from 105 and three fourths to 111 and seven eighths, and Transamerica from 14 and seven eighths to 17 and five eighths. I thought it was dumb of Joni to bother with Xerox getting only a 6 per cent rise since it's the percentages where you pay off but Winnebago was up better than 10 per cent and Transamerica close to 20 per cent. I wished I had noticed Transamerica at least although no sense being greedy, my own choices would make out all right.

Something about the paper puzzled me. The print

looked a little blurry in places and on some pages I could hardly read the words. I didn't remember any blurry pages. Also the paper it's printed on seemed a different color, darker gray, older-looking. I compared it with the newspaper that came this morning and the December 1 issue was definitely darker. A paper shouldn't get old-looking that fast, not in two days.

"I wonder if something's happening to the paper I said to my wife.

What do you mean?

Like it's deteriorating or anyway starting to change.

Anything can happen said my wife. It's like a dream you know and in dreams things change all the time without warning.

6

Wed Nov 24 I guess we just have to sweat this thing out so far the market in general isn't doing much one way or the other. This afternoon's *Post* gives the closing prices there was a rally in the morning but it all faded by the close and the Dow is down to 798.63. However my own five stocks all have had decent upward moves Tues and Wed so maybe I shouldn't worry. I have four points profit in Bausch already two in Natomas five in Levitz two in Disney three-quarters in EG&G and even though that's a long way from the quotations in the Dec 1 newspaper it's better than having losses, also there's still that "stunning two-day advance" due at the end of the month. Maybe I'm going to make out all right. Winnebago Trans-america and Xerox are also up a little bit. Market's closed tomorrow on account of Thanksgiving.

7

Thanksgiving Day. We went to the Nesbits in the afternoon. It used to be that people spent Thanksgiving

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with their own kin their aunts uncles grandparents cousins et cetera but you can't do that out here in a new suburb where everybody comes from someplace else far away so we eat the turkey with neighbors instead. The Nesbits invited the Fischers the Harrises the Thomasons and us with all the kids of course too. A big noisy gathering. The Fischers came very late so late that we were worried and thinking of sending someone over to find out what was the matter. It was practically time for the turkey when they showed up and Edith Fischer's eyes were red and puffy from crying.

My God my God she said I just found out my older sister is dead.

We started to ask the usual meaningless consoling questions like was she a sick woman and where did she live and what did she die of? And Edith sobbed and said I don't mean she's dead yet I mean she's going to die next Tuesday.

Next Tuesday Tammy Nesbit asked? What do you mean I don't understand how you can know that now. And then she thought a moment and she did understand and so did all the rest of us. Oh Tammy said the newspaper.

The newspaper yes Edith said. Sobbing harder.

Edith was reading the death notices Sid Fischer explained God knows why she was bothering to look at them just curiosity I guess and all of a sudden she lets out this terrible cry and says she sees her sister's name. Sudden passing, a heart attack.

Her heart is weak Edith told us. She's had two or three bad attacks this year.

Lois Thomason went to Edith and put her arms around her the way Lois does so well and said there there Edith it's a terrible shock to you naturally but you know it must have been inevitable sooner or later and at least the poor woman isn't suffering any more.

But don't you see Edith cried she's still alive right now

maybe if I phone and say go to the hospital right away they can save her? They might put her under intensive care and get ready for the attack before it even comes. Only I can't say that can I? Because what can I tell her? That I read about her death in next week's newspaper? She'll think I'm crazy and she'll laugh and she won't pay any attention to me. Or maybe she'll get very upset and drop dead right on the spot all on account of me. What can I do oh God what can I do?

You could say it was a premonition my wife suggested. A very vivid dream that had the ring of truth to you. If your sister puts any faith at all in things like that maybe she'll decide it can't hurt to see her doctor and then—

No Mike Nesbit broke in you mustn't do any such thing Edith. Because they can't save her. No way. They *didn't* save her when the time came.

The time hasn't come yet said Edith.

So far as we're concerned said Mike the time has already come because we have the newspapers that describe the events of Nov 30 in the past tense. So we know your sister is going to die and to all intents and purposes is already dead. It's absolutely certain because it's in the newspaper and if we accept the newspaper as authentic then it's a record of actual events beyond any hope of changing.

But my sister Edith said.

Your sister's name is already on the roll of the dead. If you interfere now it'll only bring unnecessary aggravation to her family and it won't change a thing.

How do you know it won't Mike?

The future mustn't be changed Mike said. For us the events of that one day in the future are as permanent as any event in the past. We don't dare play around with changing the future not when it's already signed sealed and delivered in that newspaper. For all we know the future's like a house of cards. If we pull one card out say your sister's life we might bring the whole house tum-

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bling down. You've got to accept the decree of fate Edith. You've got to. Otherwise there's no telling what might happen.

My sister Edith said. My sister's going to die and you won't let me do anything to save her.

8

Edith carrying on like that put a damper on the whole Thanksgiving celebration. After a while she pulled herself together more or less but she couldn't help behaving like a woman in mourning and it was hard for us to be very jolly and thankful with her there choking back the sobs. The Fischers left right after dinner and we all hugged Edith and told her how sorry we were. Soon afterward the Thomasons and the Harrises left too.

Mike looked at my wife and me and said I hope you aren't going to run off also.

No I said not yet there's no hurry is there?

We sat around some while longer. Mike talked about Edith and her sister. The sister can't be saved he kept saying. And it might be very dangerous for everybody if Edith tries to interfere with fate.

To get the subject away from Edith we started talking about the stock market. Mike said he had bought Natomas Transamerica and Electronic Data Systems which he said was due to rise from 36 and three fourths on Nov 22 to 47 by the 30th. I told him I had bought Natomas too and I told him my other stocks and pretty soon he had his copy of the December 1 paper out so we could check some of the quotations. Looking over his shoulder I observed that the print was even blurrier than it had seemed to me Tuesday night which was the last occasion I had examined my paper and also the pages seemed very gray and rough.

What do you think is going on I said? The paper definitely seems to be deteriorating.

It's entropic creep he said.

Entropic creep?

Entropy you know is the natural tendency of everything in the universe to come apart at the seams as time goes along. These newspapers must be subject to unusually strong entropic strains because of their anomalous position out of their proper place in time. I've been noticing how the print is getting harder to read and I wouldn't be surprised if it became completely illegible in another couple of days.

We hunted up the prices of my stocks in his paper and the first one we saw was Bausch & Lomb hitting a high of 149 and three fourths on November 30.

Wait a second I said I'm sure the high is supposed to be 149 even.

Mike thought it might be an effect of the general blurriness but no it was still quite clear on that page of stock market quotations and it said 149 and three fourths. I looked up Natomas and the high that was listed was 56 and seven eighths. I said I'm positive it's 57. And so on with several other stocks. The figures didn't jibe with what I remembered. We had a friendly little discussion about that and then it became not so friendly as Mike implied my memory was faulty and in the end I jogged down the street to my place and got my own copy of the paper. We spread them both out side by side and compared the quotes. Sure enough the two were different. Hardly any quote in his paper matched those in mine, all of them off an eighth here, a quarter there. What was even worse the figures didn't quite match the ones I had noted down on the first day. My paper now gave the Bausch high for November 30 as 149 and one half and Natomas as 56 and one half and Disney as 117. Levitz 104, EG&G 23 and five eighths. Everything seemed to be sliding around.

It's a bad case of entropic creep Mike said.

I wonder if the newspapers were ever identical to each

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other I said. We should have compared them on the first day. Now we'll never know whether we all had the same starting point.

Let's check out the other pages Bill.

We compared things. The front page headlines were all the same but there were little differences in the writing. The classified ads had a lot of rearrangements. Some of the death notices were different. All in all the papers were similar but not anything like identical.

How can this be happening I asked? How can words on a printed page be different one day from another?

How can a newspaper from the future get delivered in the first place Mike asked?

9

We phoned some of the others and asked about stock prices. Just trying to check something out we explained. Charlie Harris said Natomas was quoted at 56 and Jerry Wesley said it was 57 and one fourth and Bob Thomason found that the whole stock market page was too blurry to read although he thought the Natomas quote was 57 and one half. And so on. Everybody's paper slightly different.

Entropic creep. It's hitting hard.

What can we trust? What's real?

10

Saturday afternoon Bob Thomason came over very agitated. He had his newspaper under his arm. He showed it to me and said look at this Bill how can it be? The pages were practically falling apart and they were completely blank. You could make out little dirty traces where there once had been words but that was all. The paper looked about a million years old.

I got mine out of the closet. It was in bad shape but

not that bad. The print was faint and murky yet I could still make some things out clearly. Natomas 56 and one fourth. Levitz Furniture 103 and one half. Disney 117 and one fourth. New numbers all the time.

Meanwhile out in the real world the market has been rallying for a couple of days right on schedule and all my stocks are going up. I may go crazy but it looks at least like I'm not going to take a financial beating.

11

Monday night Nov 29. One week since this whole thing started. Everybody's newspaper is falling apart. I can read patches of print on two or three pages of mine and the rest is pretty well shot. Dave Bruce says his paper is completely blank the way Bob's was on Saturday. Mike's is in better condition but it won't last long. They're all getting eaten up by entropy. The market rallied strongly again this afternoon. Yesterday the Giants got beaten by St. Louis and at lunch today I collected my winnings from Butch Hunter. Yesterday also Sid and Edith Fischer left suddenly for a vacation in Florida. That's where Edith's sister lives, the one who's supposed to die tomorrow.

12

I can't help wondering whether Edith did something about her sister after all despite the things Mike said to her Thanksgiving.

13

So now it's Tuesday night November 30 and I'm home with the *Post* and the closing stock prices. Unfortunately I can't compare them with the figures in my copy of to-

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morrow's *Times* because I don't have the paper any more it turned completely to dust and so did everybody else's but I still have the notes I took the first night when I was planning my market action. And I'm happy to say everything worked out perfectly despite the effects of entropic creep. The Dow Industrials closed at 831.34 today which is just what my record says. And look at this list of highs for the day where my broker sold me out on the nose:

Levitz Furniture	103%
Bausch & Lomb	149
Natomas	57
Disney	116%
E G & G	23%

So whatever this week has cost me in nervous aggravation it's more than made up in profits.

Tomorrow is December 1 finally and it's going to be funny to see that newspaper again. With the headlines about Nixon going to China and the people wounded in the bank robbery and the currency negotiations in Rome. Like an old friend coming home.

14

I suppose everything has to balance out. This morning before breakfast I went outside as usual to get the paper and it was sitting there in the bushes but it wasn't the paper for Wednesday December 1 although this is in fact Wednesday December 1. What the newsboy gave me this morning was the paper for Monday November 22 which I never actually received the day of the first mixup.

That in itself wouldn't be so bad. But this paper is full of stuff I don't remember from last Monday. As though somebody has reached into last week and switched every-

thing around, making up a bunch of weird events. Even though I didn't get to see the *Times* that day I'm sure I would have heard about the assassination of the Governor of Missouri. And the earthquake in Peru that killed ten thousand people. And Mayor Lindsay resigning to become Nixon's new Secretary of State. Especially about Mayor Lindsay resigning to become Nixon's new Secretary of State. This paper *has* to be a joke.

But what about the one we got last week? How about those stock prices and the sports results?

When I get into the city this morning I'm going to stop off first thing at the New York Public Library and check the file copy of the November 22 *Times*. I want to see if the library's copy is anything like the one I just got.

What kind of newspaper am I going to get tomorrow?

15

Don't think I'm going to get to work at all today. Went out after breakfast to get the car and drive to the station and the car wasn't there nothing was there just gray everything gray no lawn no shrubs no trees none of the other houses in sight just gray like a thick fog swallowing everything up at ground level. Stood there on the front step afraid to go into that gray. Went back into the house woke up my wife told her. What does it mean Bill she asked what does it mean why is it all gray? I don't know I said. Let's turn on the radio. But there was no sound out of the radio nothing on the TV not even a test pattern the phone line dead too everything dead and I don't know what's happening or where we are I don't understand any of this except that this must be a very bad case of entropic creep. All of time must have looped back on itself in some crazy way and I don't know anything I don't understand a thing.

Edith what have you done to us?

I don't want to live here any more I want to cancel my

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newspaper subscription I want to sell my house I want to get away from here back into the real world but how how I don't know it's all gray gray gray everything gray nothing out there just a lot of gray

This is a song of love . . .

Starblood

WILLIAM F. NOLAN

Is the orbit stabilized?

Yes.

How much longer to penetration?

Soon now.

You first. Then I'll follow.

Do you think . . . I mean, is it possible, with this planet, that we'll be able to succeed?

We'll try. That's all we can do. I have no answers.

1

BOBBY

Bobby was still crying, his tiny face red, fists clenched, ignoring the roboMother who rocked and crooned to him.

Dennison walked over, switched off the machine and picked up his son. He carried the squalling infant to the patio where his wife was playing Magneball with an android instructor.

"Bobby's been crying all afternoon," Dennison said. "Do something with him. See if you can't shut him up."

Mrs. Dennison glared at her husband. "Let Mother handle him."

"I switched her off," said Dennison. "She wasn't doing any good. Take him for a ride in the copter. He likes that. It'll shut him up."

"You do it," said Alice Dennison. "I'm perfecting my back thrust. I play tournament next week, you know."

"You don't give a damn about your son, do you?"

She nodded to the android, ignoring the question. "Ready," she said.

A magnetic disc leaped from the instructor's hand and the woman expertly repelled it with a thrusting left glove.

"Well done, Mrs. Dennison," said the android.

In a silent rage, Dennison advanced on the android and beheaded the machine with a chair leg.

"I hope you're satisfied," said his wife. "They cost fifteen thousand dollars. I'll just have to buy another."

"You do that," said Dennison. "But first you take Bobby up in the copter. I can't stand any more of his squalling."

She scooped up the baby, who continued to howl, and took a riser to the roof-pad. Activating the family flier, she placed Bobby inside and lifted off in a whirl of gleaming blades.

Five miles above New Chicago Mrs. Dennison switched the copter to autoflight, unlatched the main exit panel and held her baby son straight out into the blast of air.

She smiled at him—and released her grip.

Still crying, Bobby Dennison fell twisting and tumbling toward the cold earth below.

2

TRIS

In Greater New York, under warm summer sun, the walkways sang. Heat from the sky stirred delicate filaments within the moving bands and a thin silver rain of music drifted up to the walkriders, soothing them, easing away some small bit of city hive pressure.

For Tris, an ex-Saint at sixteen, the pressures were

mounting and the song of the walkways did not ease her; she was close to an emotional breakpoint. When a Saint is cast out by the Gods she has nowhere to go. Society shuns the outcast. Her only chance lies in reinstating herself. If she cannot achieve this she ceases to function as a viable entity and self-extinction is her only recourse.

Tris was beautiful and free-spirited with a supple body built for Sainthood. Surely, she told herself, she would find her way back into Divine Favor.

"The Reader will see you now," said the wallspeak. "Inside and just to the left."

Tris moved ahead past the sliding wall and turned left.

Reader Sterning was ready for her, a tall man in flow-silks. His smile was warmly professional. They touched palms and Tris sat down.

"Well, well," said Sterning. "I can surface why you're here, and believe me when I tell you that I sympathize."

"Thank you, Reader," said the girl softly.

"How long were you a Saint?"

Tris knitted her fingers in her lap, twisting her hands nervously. She'd never been deeped before and it was a little frightening. "Could you . . . turn off the wall?" she asked.

"Of course," smiled Sterning, and killed the hypnowall. The swirl of colors faded to black. "I really don't need it in your case. I want you to be as comfortable as possible. Now . . ." He tented his hands. "How long were you a Saint?"

She blinked rapidly. "For almost a year. One of the Gods selected me in Omaha. They were there to flare and I offered . . ."

"You offered your Eternal Self?"

"Yes, that's right. And they accepted me. One of them did, I mean."

"The one called Denbo, am I correct?"

She nodded, flushing. "He took me. He sainted me."

Sterning bowed his head. "A rare sexual honor. A beautiful selection. And you *are*. Quite."

Tris blinked again. "Quite?"

"Quite beautiful. Thighs . . . hips . . . breasts. You are ideally qualified for sainthood." He sighed. "Your situation is most unfortunate. But let's get to it."

He moved around the desk, sat down close to her on the flowcouch, his dark eyes probing. "Lean back and relax. I'm going to deep you now. Close your eyes."

Tris shuddered; she knew there would be no pain, but the *nakedness* of it all! Her inner mind laid bare to another!

"You needn't be concerned about opening to me," Sterning said. "It's all quite normal. Deeping is a natural process for those of us who read. You have nothing to be afraid of."

"I know that," said Tris. "But . . . it isn't easy for me."

"Relax . . . just relax."

She settled back into the chair, her mind opening to his.

Sterning shifted to a below-surface level, sighed. "Ah, sadness and guilt." He began reading. "You were a truly passionate Saint and the Gods were pleased. And you got on well with all the other Saints, sharing their life and dedication until . . ."

He hesitated, probing deeper. "Until you made a mistake which cost you Divine Favor."

"Yes," murmured Tris. Her down-closed lashes quivered against her white cheek. "A mistake. I should never have—"

"—criticized." Sterning finished the thought. "You criticized a God and they banished you. Your comments were cruel, caustic."

"I was angry," said Tris. "With Denbo."

"Because he was sexually favoring other Saints."

"Yes."

"But you had no right to be angry. A God may bestow his sexual favors where he will. That is his Divine right, is it not?"

"I know, I know," said the girl. "But I thought Denbo—"

"—would consider your feelings. But of course no God need consider a Saint's feelings. That is your mortal flaw. You cannot accept nor abide by Divine rule."

"I *tried* to obey, to accept." The girl was beginning to cry, her eyes still closed. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Sterning continued to probe, unmoved by emotion. "You failed out of sheer stubborn self-pride. You felt . . ." He moved to a deeper level. ". . . You felt equal to Denbo, equal to a God. You desired more than Sainthood."

"Yes." Softly.

"And what do you want from me?"

"An answer. Surely, within my brain, somewhere within it, you can read a way back."

The Reader stood up, breaking contact. He walked to his desk, sat down heavily. "Your self-will is too strong. There is no way back. Sainthood is behind you."

"Then I'll die," she said flatly, opening her eyes. "Will you aid me?"

"I dislike this kind of thing. I don't usually—"

"Please."

He sighed. "All right."

"Thank you, Reader Sterning."

And he killed her.

3

MORGAN

The laser sliced into the right front wheelhousing of Morgan's landcar and he lost control. Another beam sizzled along the door as he rolled free of the car. It slewed into a ditch, overturned, flamed and exploded.

The heavy smoke screened him as Morgan worked his way along the ditch, a fuse pistol in his right hand. Not much good against beamguns, but his other weapons had been destroyed with the car.

The screening smoke worked two ways; he couldn't see them, verify their number. But maybe he could slip around them. It was quite possible they believed him dead in the explosion.

He was wrong about that.

A chopping blow numbed his left shoulder. Morgan hit ground, rolled, brought up the fuser, fired. His assailant fell back, grunting in pain. Morgan whipped up the pistol in a swift arc, catching a second enemy at chin-level, firing again. Which did the job.

Morgan rubbed circulation back into his numbed shoulder, his body pressed close in against the night-chilled gravel at the edge of the road. Behind him, in a flare of orange, the landcar continued to burn. He listened for further movement. Were there more of them out there, ready to attack him?

No sound. Nothing. No more of them. Only two, both dead now.

He took their beamers, checked the bodies. Both young, maybe fifteen to seventeen. Probably brothers, but Morgan couldn't tell for sure since the face was mostly gone on the smaller one. At close range a fuser is damned effective.

Morgan recharged the pistol, inspected the beamguns, breaking them down. They were fine. He could use them.

It was too late to find another car. Better to sleep by the lake and go on in the morning.

The lake would be good. It would cool him out, ease some of the tension which knotted his muscles. As a boy he'd grown up near lakes like this one, fishing and swimming them with Jim Decker. Ole Jimbo. Poor unlucky bastard. The police got him in Detroit, lasered him down

in a warehouse. Jimbo never believed he could die. Well, thought Morgan, we *all* die—sooner or later.

Lake Lotawana lay just ahead, less than a mile through the trees. Morgan threaded the woods, slid down the leaf-cloaked banking to the edge of the water. The lake flickered like soft flame, alive with moonlight. Morgan bent to wash his face and hands; the water rippled and stirred as he cupped it, cold and crystalline.

He drew the clean air of September into his lungs. Good autumn air, smelling of maple and oak. He savoured the smells of Missouri earth, of autumn grass and trees. A night bird cried out across the dark lake water.

Morgan hoped he would live long enough to reach Kansas City and do what he was sent to do. He could easily have been killed in the landcar explosion—or in Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania or a few nights ago in Kansas. They'd been close on his tracks most of the way.

He prepared a bed of leaves, spreading dry twigs in a circle around him for several feet in each direction. The twigs would alert him to approaching enemies. Morgan lay down with a beamer at his elbow. Tomorrow he would find another car and reach Kansas City. The girl and the money would be waiting there. He smiled and closed his eyes.

Morgan was sleeping deeply when they came down the bank, shadows among shadows, moving with professional stealth. They knelt beyond the circle of twigs and began scooping the branches away quietly. They planned to use blades and that meant close body-contact.

Morgan heard them at the last instant and rolled sideways, snatching up the beamer as he rolled. Too late. They were on him in a mass of unsheathed steel.

He broke free, stumbled, dropped the useless weapon, blood rushing to fill his open mouth. Morgan folded both hands across his stomach. "I . . ." He spoke to them as they watched him. "I'm a dead man."

And he fell backward as the dark waters of the lake, rippling, accepted his lifeless body.

4

DAVID

"I *hate* bookstores," said David.

"You're still a child," his Guardian told him. "As an adult you'll see the value in books."

David, who was eleven, allowed himself to be guided into the store. You don't get anywhere if you argue with a Guardian.

"May I be of service?" A tall old man smiled at them, dressed in the long gray robe of Learning.

"This is David," said the Guardian, "and he is here to rent a book."

The old man nodded. "And what is your choice, David?"

"I don't have one," said David. "Let Guardian decide."

"Very well, then . . ." The Bookman smiled again. "Might I suggest some titles?"

"Please do," said the Guardian.

The old man pursed his lips. "Ah . . . what about *Moby Dick*? Splendid seafaring adventure laced with symbolic philosophy."

"I hate whales," said David. "Sea things are disgusting."

"Hmmm. Then I shall bypass Mr. Melville and Mr. Verne. Let us move along to Dylan Thomas and his spirited *Under Milk Wood*."

"Let's hear part of it," said David.

The old man pressed a button on the wall and a door opened. A rumpled figure stepped into the room. His nose was red and bulbous; his hair was wild. He walked toward them, voice booming. He spoke of a small town by night, starless and bible-black, and of a wood "limp-

ing invisible down to the sloeback, slow, black, crow-black, fishingboat-bobbing sea."

"I don't like it," said David flatly. "Send him back."

"That will be all, Mr. Thomas," said the Bookman.

The rumpled figure turned and vanished behind the door.

"I want a hunting story of olden times," said David.

"Do you have any?"

"Naturally. We have many. What about *Big Woods*?"

"Who wrote that?" asked David.

"Mr. Faulkner. You'll like him, I'm sure."

David shrugged, and the Bookman pressed another button. A tall man with sad eyes and a bristled moustache stepped into view. He spoke, with a drawl, of woods and rivers and loamed earth and of "the rich deep black alluvial soil which would grow cotton taller than the head of a man on a horse."

"We'll take him," said David.

"Indeed we will," said the Guardian.

"Splendid," said the Bookman.

William Faulkner waited quietly while the rental sheet was signed, then walked out with them.

"There is a story in my book," he said to David, "which I have titled 'The Bear.' Do you wish to hear it?"

"Sure. I want to hear the whole book if it's all about hunting."

"The boy has a strange fascination with death," the Guardian said to Mr. Faulkner.

"Then I shall begin with page one," drawled the tall man as they were crossing a gridway.

David, looking up into the sad eyes of William Faulkner, did not see the gridcar jetting toward him. The Guardian screamed and clawed at the boy's coat to pull him back, but was not successful. The car struck David, killing him instantly.

"Am I to be returned?" asked Mr. Faulkner.

BAX

They were having shrimp curry at the Top of the Mark in San Francisco when the sharks began to bother the girl.

"They're so *close*," she said. "Why are they so close?"

Bax snapped his fingers. A waiter appeared at their table. "Do something about those damn things," Bax demanded.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but our repel shielding has temporarily failed."

"Can't you fix it?"

"Oh, of course, sir. That's being attended to now. We have the situation under control. At any moment the shielding should be fully operational."

Bax waved him away. "Are you satisfied?" he asked the girl.

She picked at her food, head lowered. "I just won't look at them," she said.

The sharks continued to bump the transparent outer shell, while a huge Manta Ray rippled through the jeweled waters. Far below, streaks of rainbow fish swarmed in and around the quake-tumbled ruins of office buildings, lichen-carpeted trucks and cable cars. An occasional divecab sliced past the restaurant, crowded with tourists.

Bax leaned across the table to take the girl's hand; his eyes softened. "I thought you'd enjoy it here. This place is an exact duplicate of the original. You get a fantastic view of the city."

"I feel trapped," she admitted. "I'm a surface girl, Bax. I don't like being here."

Bax grinned. "To tell you the truth, I don't like it much myself. But, at the moment, we really don't have any choice."

"I know." She gave his hand a squeeze. "And it's all right. It's just that I—"

"Look," Bax cut in. "They've fixed it."

The nuzzling sharks thrashed back abruptly as the domes energized shielding was reactivated. The outer shell now pulsed radiantly, silvering the sea. The sharks retreated deeper into the green-black Pacific.

"It's something about their teeth," the girl said to Bax. "Like thousands of upthrust knives . . ."

"Well, they're gone now. Forget them. Eat your curry."

"When is the contact meeting us?" she asked.

"He's overdue. Should be here any minute."

"You don't think anything's wrong, do you?"

Bax shook his head. "What *could* be wrong?" He patted the inside of his coat. "I have the stuff. They pay us for it and we leave San Fran for the islands. Take a long vacation. Enjoy what we've earned."

"What about a crossup?" Her voice was intense. "What if they hired another agent to take the stuff and dispose of you?"

He laughed. "You mean dispose of *us*, don't you?"

The girl stared at him coldly. "No. I mean you, Bax."

Bax dropped his half-empty wine glass. "You lousy bitch," he said softly, slumping forward across the table.

The girl darted her hand into his coat, withdrew a small packet and placed it inside her evening bag as a waiter rushed toward them.

"I think my husband has just had a heart seizure," she said. "I'll go for a doctor."

And she calmly left the bar.

Outside, beyond the silvered fringe of light, the knife-toothed sharks circled the dome.

LYNDA

The wind was demented; it whip-lashed the falling snow into Lynda's eyes, into her half-open mouth as she stood, head raised to the storm, taking it in, allowing it to engulf her. The collar of her stormcoat was open and the cold snow needled her skin.

Then the wall glowed. Someone wanted her.

Annoyed, she killed the blizzard. The wind ceased. The snow melted instantly. The ceiling-sky was, once again, blue and serene above her head. She stepped from the Weatherchamber, peeling her stormcoat and boots.

Her father was there, looking his usual dour self.

"Sorry to break into your weather, Lynda, but I must talk to you."

She walked to the barwall, pressed an oak panel, and an iced Scotch glided into her hand. "Drink?" she offered.

"You know I never drink on the job."

She sipped at the Scotch. "I see. You're in town on a contract."

"That's right."

"I think it's revolting." She shook her head. "Why don't you get out of this business? You're too old to go on killing. You'll make a mistake and one of your contracts will end up doing *you* in. It happens all the time."

"Not to me it won't," said Lynda's father. "I know my job."

"It's sickening."

The older man grunted. "It's provided you with everything you've ever wanted."

"And I guess I should be humbly grateful. As the pampered daughter of a high-level professional assassin I'm very rich and very spoiled. I am, in fact, a totally worthless addition to society, thanks to you."

"Then you shouldn't mind leaving it," he said.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"It means, dearest daughter, that my contract, this trip, is on you."

And the beamgun he held beneath his coat took off Lynda's head.

The pattern is fixed. It's hopeless.

You don't want to try again?

To what purpose? Each time one of us penetrates we're rejected. This planet does not want us. We'll have to move beyond the system.

Would the host bodies have survived without us?

Everyone on Earth dies eventually. But we trigger quick, violent death. It's their way of rejecting us. We must accept the pattern.

I liked the girl in New York . . . Tris. And the little boy, David. We could have flowered in them.

The universe is immense. We'll find a host planet that's benign. Where we'll be welcome.

We're leaving Earth's orbit now.

The stars are waiting for us. A billion billion suns!

I love you!

END

. . . in which an absolutely mad scientist comes up with a logical explanation for certain supernatural manifestations . . .

The Tempolluters

G. C. EDMONDSON

"I've never seen one," my mad friend protested.

"You'll be one if you don't watch it!" I yelled.

He swerved past a lorry into a clockwise roundabout. Circling past our off-ramp, my friend said something. From its vehemence I suspected the Arabic abhorrence for things lefthanded was being extended to countries that drive that way.

Finally I saw an opening. We shot blindly and made it at no cost, save to the disposition of a bowler-hatted gentleman in a mini auto. "Are we going the wrong way?" I asked.

My mad friend gritted his teeth and ignored me. "What was that address again?" he asked.

"The Grove, near Harpenden, Fitch Lane, New Maiden—" I stopped for breath.

"Yet *they* can get mail delivered three times a day!" he groused.

In the back wives continued their discussion of whether the new wraith look could be worn with hip boots. Abruptly my mad friend stopped. We got out and entered a tiny office. Behind the desk a small dark man smiled.

"I don't believe it!" I said. But I really did. This little man with the dazzling smile of an Algerian rug peddler had been slipping in and out of our lives in different guises, different languages, different countries since my

mad friend and I were much smaller cogs in the respective machines that hire us. His improbable stories all hinged around an improbable future whence he had visited us with his roommate's time machine. He was not marooned here, since he still had the machine. But if the little man were given credence, he had destroyed his own past: A 2500 A.D. golden age where Constantinople never fell and Mohammed was Bishop of Medina. It all sounded too good ever to be true.

"I believe it." My mad friend referred to the Byzantine's smiling presence in a realtor's office and not to the little man's improbable past future perfect.

"You seek isolation," the Byzantine said. "A large estate with accommodation for a hundred patients—persons!" he hastily corrected.

"Wait till I get my hands on that security officer!" I said. My mad friend added something in Arabic. It sounded like fingers bending the wrong way.

Then I remembered how easy it could be to invade files if one could go to the proper spot and wait for a burglarproof building to be erected around one's invisible time machine.

"I am prepared to accept ninety thousand pounds," the Byzantine said. He hesitated a moment then smiled and added, "Or one hundred eighty thousand of which sixty will be equally divided and deposited in two numbered Swiss accounts."

"I suppose you know the numbers too?" my friend muttered.

"Since you have no such accounts I offer the more straightforward proposition first."

"What's he talking about?" a wife asked.

"A happy old age," I said. "Providing you're happy in a non-extraditable country."

There was a moment's silence then wives resumed their discussion of the new wraith look.

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"Ninety thousand then," the Byzantine said with an earwarping smile.

Though he drove like a Jew in Egypt, the Byzantine was familiar with wrong-way traffic. Rain, mist, and lack of a pocket compass kept me from knowing for sure if he was circling. Hours later we rumbled over a ready-to-collapse bridge and the car stopped. We walked up an overgrown path to a building by Charles Addams out of the Baskervilles.

"If you're ever going to see one, this's where," I said.

"Probably not even a TV," my friend said.

"What are you talking about?" a wife asked.

"Ghosts."

"No problem," the Byzantine hastened.

"Don't believe in them," another wife added.

"You just shot down 33 and a third of the Trinity," I said.

My mad friend made a ritual gesture but said nothing. A massive door creaked and we were in out of the drizzle. The Byzantine produced a flask of some liquid which the locals distill. My mad friend regarded it wistfully.

I rummaged through my tools and began going over the house with a sniffer. I had covered twenty odd rooms—some of them decidedly odd—in one upstairs wing when my mad friend came looking for me. He saw the pentagon on the floor but apart from a gesture of exorcism made no observation. The Byzantine and various wives were waiting in the foyer.

"Clean so far," I reported.

"Surely no one bugs an empty house," the Byzantine said.

"Not bugs," I explained. "Stray radar beams."

My mad friend looked at me and we shrugged. It had seemed like a real fun trip when I'd received a sudden promotion and learned his own mission overlapped mine. Up till now no one had learned that our money belonged

to the government of a friendly country. Prices hadn't been bad but every place had been too close to a road, within sweep of some radar station, or had nosy neighbors. We had been approaching a nadir of soggy booted despair when the description of this place had arrived without explanation in the morning post.

"I knew you'd like it," the Byzantine said.

It was raining hard again. We made a dash for the car and the Byzantine drove as far as the bridge. He would have driven farther but there was no bridge.

"Now what?" a wife asked.

The large American car was not the smartest choice for left handed traffic on narrow, English roads but it had certain saving graces. I used the telephone.

"Can you wait there till morning?" Shapiro asked.

"I suppose we can but why should we?"

"Because every chopper is out rescuing people who're really in trouble."

Since he put it that way. . . . The Byzantine backed up the driveway and we made another mad dash for the house. My mad friend and I wandered about photographing and sketching, trying to deduce a floor plan. "Like one of Sarah Winchester's bad days," my friend muttered as he scratched out another line. "There *were* eleven rooms on that side, weren't there?"

"Who cares? They'll knock partitions out to suit themselves. Incidentally, do you have any idea what this place is really going to be?"

"My first wild guess would be a demesne for demented Top Secret types who can't be shunted off to just any old State Home for the Bewildered."

I pondered a moment. "Could be; but I'm not a counter surveillance man. Strikes me as if they need some place where the air isn't full of UHF garbage. Nobody said anything about debugging. And since this is the only country on Earth with lousier security than ours, why not in some congressman's home district?"

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"Ours not to reason why," my mad friend said. Suddenly he looked to one side.

Que paso? I asked.

He shrugged and we continued measuring and sketching until it turned dark. Downstairs we found a picnic lunch laid out on a baronial table. The Byzantine wore his usual ineradicable smile but all wives were very quiet. Once more I asked, "What happened?"

"I saw something," a wife said.

"At the risk of repeating myself—"

But everybody talked at once so I abandoned the subject in favor of cold chicken and *empanadas de refritos*, washed down with Valdepenas. Not exactly *cordon bleu* but neither was it steak and kidney pie.

After the first famelic frenzy we relaxed and a wife portioned out the remaining coffee. Outside the wind howled with more enthusiasm than was strictly necessary. With each gust rain rattled on the windows and somewhere a shutter slammed.

"How many candles are left?" a wife asked.

"Plenty, the Byzantine said. At that moment the lights came on. There were agitated cawings and cluckings as if they had just gone off instead of on. "You act like you'd seen a ghost," I said.

"I did." It was the wife who had not believed.

"What did it look like?"

"I could see through him."

I was about to ask the Byzantine if a family of resident nuts came with the house when I saw my mad friend's face. "Were you by having a sight of it too?" I asked in Gaelic.

"Say naught but there's aught amiss," he said, then buried the remark under a collation of creations and citations which narration in translation was a formation of orations, in condensation, an aggregation of alliteration.

"Could you go through that again slowly?" the Byzantine asked.

"Whenever you state the fate that created your mandate for this estate."

"I'm not an agent," the Byzantine said. "I own it."

"Do you also own those things that gae boomp i' the nicht?"

"What things?"

"Really don't believe in that stuff," another wife was saying.

I gave up. Our survey had covered part of the upper stories but we hadn't yet described the hall. My mad friend went to work with tape measure and sketch book. I took a sweep with my sniffer. Satisfied that the baronial hall was not being swept with radar, I began climbing about on the furniture seeking a spot where the Polaroid's wide-angle lens could include the whole room. Perched in my stocking feet atop a sideboard, I was focussing when some wife said "*Miral*"

She said it with such depth of feeling that I fired the camera and descended sooner than I had planned. I ripped film out of the camera and was climbing for a second try when a wife silently handed me the picture I'd just ruined.

I handed it to my mad friend. He studied it in equal silence and gave it to the Byzantine.

"Is that what you wanted me to look at?" I asked.

Wives nodded.

"You *do* want to sell this house?" my mad friend asked.

The Byzantine's smile was never more sincere.

"Then let's cut the 'B' picture antics. Even the Truest Believer can see that's just some clown draped in a sheet."

"But why can you see through him?" a wife asked.

"Double exposure," I said. And saying it, I realized this camera had the film advance and shutter cocking linked together precisely so there would be no double

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exposures. Looking at my mad friend, I knew he knew it too.

"All right," I said loudly, "we've got a ghost. Now let's check out the woodwork and find the rear projection setup and kick some dismal dipdreck out into the rain along with his merry pranks."

An hour later I was convinced that the woodwork was producing or consuming no electromagnetic energy. "Wouldn't explain what I thought I saw upstairs anyhow," my mad friend said.

There was nothing remarkable about the picture: simply a middle-aged man draped toga-style in a sheet with an expression as if he'd just stepped out of the Turkish bath to answer a call and the telephone had attacked him. My mad friend looked at me. We both looked at the Byzantine who smiled and clowned outrageously to distract distraught wives.

I poked through my tools and came upon some Aztec Tranquilizer. "*Un trago de tequila?*" I asked.

The Byzantine's smile became even broader as he accepted the bottle. Half a litre's worth of *tragos* later my mad friend girded himself.

"The finality of this sale depends strictly on the enforceability of privacy," he began. "Though specifications were not written with ghosts in mind, I've read them and in no place do I find exclusions thereof. In view of current legal thought in our Sovereign Republic, such exclusions would probably, because of their discriminatory nature, be ruled unconstitutional." Since the Byzantine seemed confused my mad friend repeated the whole shmeat in Spanish.

"To put it another way," I explained, "either we find these ghosts or the sale's off."

"But your instruments detect nothing," the little man insisted.

"There are more things in heaven and earth . . ." my mad friend muttered.

"Every castle has one," the Byzantine insisted.

"Not the kind that photographs without extra work in the darkroom."

The Byzantine gave up. "I really don't know," he said. "Is it always the same?"

He helped himself to my Aztec Tranquilizer. "No," he finally said. "Always dressed the same, always men, but not the same man. Sometimes—"

"Sometimes what?" a wife probed.

"*Deja vu*, I guess. But sometimes I could swear I knew them."

Conversation languished until finally my mad friend asked, "Any bedding around here?"

The Byzantine found a linen closet.

"You're not getting me up in one of those cold dark bedrooms!" a wife said.

"Suit yourself," my friend said, and disappeared upstairs. She saw the rest of us departing and hastened after him.

I had finally warmed a spot in the bed and was drifting off when a cold, steel-like grip of incredible strength clamped me by the shoulder. "Now what?" I asked.

"*Miral*!" a wife said.

Arms outstretched and glowing faintly, the wraithlike image of a man in a sheet stumbled along. He seemed even more worried than the wife beside me as he walked through a wall. The commotion on the other side suggested he was still visible.

Minutes later all hands were downstairs again. My mad friend restored order. "Have these things ever menaced you?" he asked the Byzantine.

The small man thought a moment. "No," he finally said.

The questioning continued and evermore came out by that same door wherein it went. Finally I tried a new

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tack. "Since when do you possess property in this part of the world?" I asked.

"I needed a *pied a terre*. The price and other things were right."

"What other things?"

"Uninterrupted human occupancy for some centuries."

My mad friend was mumbling something about rites of exorcism when I finally saw the implications in the Byzantine's remark. "The time machine!" I exclaimed. "You found a way to cut it loose from that electrical outlet in Istambul!"

"Marvelous, Holmes," my mad friend growled.

But the Byzantine was nodding. "Less risky if one can come out at ground level or inside a room. I've always worried about materializing underground."

"What does this have to do with ghosts?" a wife asked.

"Nothing," the little man said.

"How come you no longer need the place?"

"Oh, I'm not vacating."

My mad friend applied an open palm to his forehead.

"I'm moving one day into the future," the Byzantine explained. "To all intents and purposes the house will be empty."

Somehow this all made sense providing I didn't think about it too long. The Byzantine helped himself to Aztec Tranquilizer again. "How'd you happen to leave Istanbul?" I finally asked.

"Too crowded. Especially since the Americans put in another big radar station."

"Where do you keep your time machine?"

"Tomorrow."

"I mean physically."

"Upstairs."

"You seem to know all about this deal. What's this building really wanted for?"

The Byzantine shrugged. "A medical research center, I guess."

"What sort of research?"

"Desordenes mentales."

"It is a happy hacienda!" my friend said.

"You might put it that way," the Byzantine said. "From what I've seen they're interested in the place for the same reasons I was."

"Continuous occupation?" Something else was in the back of my mind but despite valiant efforts it stayed there. "Makes sense," I murmured.

"How?" my mad friend asked.

"You've heard of cancer houses?"

From the uniformly blank stares I guessed nobody had. "It's well established and documented," I said. "Apparently certain houses become impregnated with a virus or somesuch. Whoever lives there runs a much higher risk of cancer than the statistical norm."

"You're not just making this up?" a wife asked.

"Cross my heart."

"What's this got to do with ghosts?" my friend asked.

"Extrapolate. That old Freudian jazz is out. Most people know it's only a matter of time before mental disorders are controlled chemically. If there's a cancer virus, why not an insanity virus? After all, anybody knows insanity is contagious."

"Nu?" my mad friend asked.

"People don't like to face it. They don't even like to discuss hereditary factors."

"Hereditary my hernial!" my mad friend said.

"You're absolutely right. It isn't hereditary. It's contagious. That's why shrinks and ward boys go odd so often and they're not related to the patients. Primitive man knows this instinctively. That's why he's afraid of nuts."

"Even assuming it were true—" my friend began.

"What better place to hunt for an insanity virus than in a house that's harbored ten generations of nutty dukes?"

"Or built those odd rooms upstairs," my friend added

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thoughtfully. "But I still don't see what this has to do with ghosts."

"I'll tell you after I find the library."

The Byzantine beckoned.

Only craven cowardice and fear of legal reprisals force me to suppress the name of the noble family that misruled from this country seat. In 1066 one earl extended his holdings by selling smutted rye to the soldiers of Harold II, thus tripping them out while Billy Bastard was getting in his licks.

"Billy who?"

"Signed himself Guillaume Batard," my mad friend parenthesized. "Squeamish schoolmoms call him William the Conqueror."

"In 1381 a duke Roosevelted his peers by backing Wat Tyler's peasant revolt," I continued. "In 1588 another stored supplies for the Armada Invincible. When the Spaniards didn't show he sold them to the Irish."

"Bully for him!" my mad friend exclaimed.

"In 1914 a member of this family was winning the war with cavalry. In 1943 one convinced the Admiralty that it was essential to build more battleships."

"What about now?" my mad friend asked.

"The last duke emigrated in 1959."

"Is that when the Canadian dollar went back down under par?"

We were interrupted by another ghost. This time wives made no more outcry than they would have at a mercaptan martini. I fired my camera and my mad friend his pistol simultaneously. The sheetclad figure faced us with a look of surprised outrage. Fading, he stumbled through a wall. "You shouldn't oughta done that," I said.

"I know," my mad friend said regretfully. "I think I hurt him."

I was learning more about the fascinating proprietors of this house when the Byzantine came looking for more Aztec Tranquilizer.

"Are you sure the tenants will never know you're still living here a day ahead of them?" I asked.

"My apartment in Istanbul was geared for multiple occupancy."

"You don't think it an odd coincidence that photographable ghosts suddenly appear in the only house in the world with a time machine?" I asked.

"Not the only one," the little man said with a trace of bitterness.

"Aha!"

"I came home late one night and the envoys of a certain government were trying to dismantle it."

That thing in the back of my mind took one pace forward. "No radar beams!" I exclaimed. "You left Istanbul because it interferes with time travel?"

The little man nodded. "My roommate, who built it five hundred years from now in New Rome, told me never to try to open it, that it was wrapped in some sort of stasis."

"Have you tried?"

"It looks easy but for some reason a screwdriver won't go into the slots."

"How successful were your spies?"

"Not very. I stormed about and allowed myself to be mollified, then waited while they got stop motion cameras and all sorts of equally complicated nonsense. Then I went back a day. They're probably still waiting."

"When did this happen?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Here?"

He nodded.

"Which government?" my mad friend asked.

The little man was embarrassed. "Yours."

"Before or after we were sent on this pursuit of the nondomesticated merganser?"

"After."

"I wonder what went wrong?" my friend muttered.

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I could guess.

"Oh, I know," the Byzantine said. "Your government started experimenting and the inevitable happened: A foreign power learned of it and began their own experiments. When they went back in time and your then-agents got wind of it there was no way of explaining to them that your side had it first albeit later than—" The Byzantine stopped to sort out his tenses.

"Grammar is about to undergo radical changes," my mad friend grunted.

"That isn't all that'll change," I said. "I'd rather see fissionables in the five and dime than everybody fiddling with time lines."

"I don't believe it," a wife said.

"You didn't believe in ghosts," my friend said.

"I still don't," I said.

"You see them on TV. Maybe your old s-f gimmick about duplicate receivers is true. Perhaps some time travellers have split so many times they're ghosts through attenuation."

I tried to guess whether my friend was serious.

"How does one exorcise a virus?" he asked.

"If you're going to play it broad," I said, "Maybe they're splitting personalities."

Everyone looked at me.

"Why not? Easy with hypnosis and drugs. Get them split, hold Jeckyll and fire Mr. Hyde off into the past where he's no problem except to the poor suckers who happen to live there."

"So that's where Hitler came from," my friend said.

It was the Byzantine who brought us back down. "You were sent to find me," he said.

I looked at my mad friend. Both of us looked at the Byzantine.

"When I disappeared into the past," he explained. "Don't you wonder why this place fits your requirements so exactly?"

Light began to dawn.

"That's what I get for listening to that doubledastardly disinheritor of widows and orphans!" my mad friend said.

"Who?"

"The dipdreck that convinced me I'd be doing my country a service by going off on this junket instead of harassing hashpeddlers back where I belong!"

And now I knew why I got that sudden promotion and transfer. Looking at the sad-eyed Byzantine, I realized we had all taken the same ride. "Why did you let us find you?"

"It does you a favor and costs me nothing." He took the last swallow of Aztec Tranquilizer and walked out of the library. Before he was quite through the door I saw him coming back in.

Then the smile and suddenly positive attitude prepared me for it even before the little man spoke. "I've been gone three days," he said, and put down a package.

"Now he tells me there's a way out of here!" my mad friend said.

"Only if you believe in time machines," the Byzantine said, and pulled out a litre of Three Star. His earwarping smile was back with a vengeance. "*Chantaje*," he said.

"*Como?*"

"Blackmail," he repeated. "Against their own grandchildren."

I sipped Three Star. Outside, rain and wind were still doing the Wuthering Heights bit. My mad friend looked wistfully at the cognac. He brightened when the Byzantine pulled a thermos of coffee from the package. "I probably won't believe it," he said.

"Their machine isn't very good," the Byzantine began. "They send somebody into the future and a ghost image flies off into the past. The traveller arrives several ounces lighter."

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"How many trips to take off five pounds?" a wife asked.

"Those are our ghosts?" my friend asked.

"But why dressed in sheets?" I asked.

"You were right about the ultimate use of this house," the Byzantine continued. "*Un manicomio*. They're using the time machine for treatment."

"Sending their nuts into the future for advanced techniques?"

The Byzantine nodded. "Along with threats to diddle their descendants out of existence if they don't treat these patients promptly."

"How?"

"Oh, practice continence, for instance, at the moment when a certain person was to be conceived."

My mad friend said something in Arabic. It sounded like tape running backward at the wrong speed. The Byzantine nodded in furious agreement. "Or worse," he added.

"These ghost fractions that split off—are they gone forever?"

The Byzantine shrugged. "I suppose our descendants track them down and put them back together. A man would never feel whole again without all his parts."

A wife looked up sharply then went back to her discussion of the new wraith look.

My mad friend poked absently around the library. Suddenly he withdrew a black leather volume. After a quick look through it he snapped it shut and made ritual gestures of exorcism. The Byzantine gave a sad smile. Remembering some of those decidedly odd rooms upstairs I guessed what my mad friend had discovered. "The Hellfire Club?"

"Oh, let me see!" Several wives exclaimed. And while they were looking through the pornographic hokum of those 18th century seekers after *any* kind of an answer

from the Eternal Silence I wished for a way to let Ben Franklin and company know their curiosity had led to this.

Something had to be done if treachery, ingratitude, injustice, the eternal verities of life were to be preserved for future generations.

"Something Must Be Done," my mad friend said, and I caught the germ of a perfectly fiendish idea.

"Will you jeopardize your immortal soul for humanity's future?" I asked.

My mad friend thought a moment. "Greater love hath no man," he finally said.

"Can you take us back when the first ghost shows up?" I asked the Byzantine.

"Easily."

"And get me—" I gave him a list of parts. The small man left the room and returned instantly. I put the components together into a photoelectric ghost alarm. After several feverish hours we were ready.

Whichever Hellfire Club member designed those mini-skirted nun's habits could have cleared up in the mod fashion world. Wives were far more appealing in them than I and my mad friend who merely looked embarrassed in satan suits. The Byzantine's dark skin made him suitable for Chief Pitchforker. With psychedelic lights and a couple of authentic gas flames we were ready for the first ghost. Skipping about in response to photoelectric alarms we spent the next few hours giving each fragmented time traveller an unforgettable experience.

Finally the detectors were silent. My mad friend peeled off his domino and rubbed his forehead where horns had worn twin spots of irritation. "And all these years I thought evil was supposed to be fun," he grouched.

"Did we accomplish anything?" the Byzantine asked.

"If our descendants do their job right and put them all back together again," I said.

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"Then what?" a wife asked.

"They'll be sane but one part of them'll be so damn turned off on time travel—so full of subliminal horrors that no bungling bureaucrat'll ever turn him into a temporanaut again."

"What drove them up the wall to begin with?" my mad friend wondered.

The Byzantine smiled his sad smile. "Curiosity. Their machine has no safety interlocks."

My mad friend understood. "It really is better not to know one's own future, isn't it? But can we be sure this is the end of time travel research for a while?"

"Most of those reconstituted temporanauts will feel strongly enough to toss a grenade into that machine," the Byzantine said.

"How about you?" I asked.

"I think I'll disappear for a while," the little man said. "In fact, I'll do it right now." He stepped out of the library and in a sudden lull I could hear him walking upstairs. I also heard a helicopter plup-plupping down in front of the house.

While my mad friend stalled Shapiro's rescue team in the foyer I rushed about the house dismantling the ghost traps into their unrecognizable components. Finally we stepped into the chopper.

It was just turning daylight when we set down at Regional HQ. The pilot and extra man on the chopper rushed us out and across the windswept field into the ground floor of control. "Hi," I said to Shapiro.

"You're all under arrest," Shapiro answered.

My mad friend was muttering something in Latin. With a sinking feeling that I already knew the answer, I asked, "Why?"

"Witchcraft," Shapiro said.

The dictionary defines 'talent' as a 'special often creative or artistic aptitude.' It does not say that the talent has to be either useful, or welcome . . .

Ollie's Hands

DEAN R. KOONTZ

Ollie's hands were always soft and moist, even in the coldest weather. His fingers were thin and tapered in an extraordinary manner. When he gripped something, his fingers seemed to fuse with the surface of the object. When he let it go, the release was like a sigh.

Every night, Ollie visited the unlighted alleyway behind Staznik's Restaurant (French and Italian cuisine) where he sensed out the accidentally discarded silverware in the three, large, over-flowing garbage cans. Because Staznik himself believed in quality, and because his prices were high, the tableware was expensive enough to make Ollie's undignified rooting worthwhile. Every two weeks, he managed to sense out enough pieces to constitute a matched set which he sold to one of several used furniture stores in exchange for wine money. That was only one source of his funds; in his own way, he was a clever man. On that Tuesday night, early in July, however, his cleverness was tested to its limits. When he made his nightly trip into the alley to sense out the knives, forks and spoons, he found, instead, the unconscious girl.

She was lying against the last garbage can, face toward the brick wall, eyes closed, hands drawn across her small breasts like a child in sleep. In the cheap, tight, short dress that was rucked to the tops of her thighs, she was clearly no child: her pale flesh glimmered like a sub-

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dued flame viewed through smoked glass. Otherwise, Ollie could not see much of her.

"Miss?" he asked, leaning toward her.

She did not respond. She did not move.

He knelt beside her, shook her, found he could not wake her. When he rolled her onto her back to get a look at her face, he heard something rattle out from under her. Striking a match, he discovered that she had been curled against the paraphernalia of a junkie's habit: a syringe, charred spoon, metal cup, half-used candle, several packets of white powder wrapped in plastic and then in foil. He might have left her there and gone ahead with his sensing out of spoons—he did not like or understand snowbirds, being strictly a man of spirits, himself—but the match flame revealed her face and insured his concern: broad forehead, well-set eyes, a pert and freckled nose, full lips with both erotic promise and childish innocence. When the match went out and the darkness rushed in again, Ollie knew he could not leave her there, for she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

"Miss?" he asked, shaking her shoulder again.

She did not respond.

He looked toward both ends of the alleyway, but he did not see anyone who might misinterpret his intentions. Thus assured, he bent close to her and felt for a heartbeat, found a weak one, held his moist palm close to her nostrils and found the barest exhalation of warm breath. She was alive.

He stood and wiped his palms on his rumpled, dirty trousers, cast one mournful glance at the unplumbed cans of waste, then lifted her. He discovered that she weighed little, and he carried her in his arms like a groom crossing the threshold with his bride, though he gave no thought to the carnal aspect of that ritual. His heart pounding with the unaccustomed exertion, he carried her to the far end of the alley, hurried across the de-

served street and disappeared into the mouth of another unlighted backstreet.

Ten minutes later he unlocked the door of his basement room and carried her inside, put her on the bed, locked the door, switched on a low watt bulb in a paper-shaded lamp beside the bed. She was still breathing.

He stared at her, wondering what to do next. Thus far, he had been purposeful; now, he was confused. Frustrated by his inability to think clearly, he unlocked the door and went outside again, locked it after him. He retraced his course to the rear of the restaurant, located her purse and filled it with the skag and other items, returned to his basement room possessed by a strange anxiety he could not understand at all. He had forgotten the tableware in Staznik's garbage.

Sitting beside the bed in a straight-backed chair, Ollie went through the purse, removed the syringe and candle, destroyed them and threw them in the wastecan. In the bathroom, he ripped open the packets of heroin and flushed the contents down the toilet. He placed the tin can on the floor and methodically stamped it flat. He washed his hands, dried them on a tattered hotel towel and felt much better.

The girl's breathing had grown shallower and less rhythmic; her face was gray, perspiration strung across her forehead like bright beads. Standing over her, Ollie realized that she was dying, and he was suddenly very frightened.

He folded his arms so that his long-fingered hands were hidden in his armpits. The fleshy pads of his fingertips were excessively moist. Dimly, he was aware that these hands could perform more useful tricks than locating silverware buried in mounds of mashed potatoes, but he did not want to admit their capabilities: that way lay danger . . .

He got a gallon of wine from the cardboard clothes

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cupboard and drank straight from the jug. It tasted like water. He knew that he was not going to find release in wine—not tonight . . . not with the girl lying there . . . Not with his hands trembling as they were. He put the wine away.

Ollie could not—chose not to—remember how long his hands had been the shaping force of his life, though he did remember the agony they had caused him. The past extended no farther than last week; he saw to that with his wine. He despised using his hands for anything but earning wine money, but now he knew he had no choice. Other more basic motivations coiled in him, made him act. She was beautiful, and the smooth clear lines of her face, so symmetrical that even the hue of sickness could not much detract from them, caught at him like a delicate web, held him. He followed his hands to the bed, a blind man feeling for obstacles in a strange room.

For his hands to perform properly, he needed to undress her. She wore no underclothes. Her breasts were small, firm, high; her waist was small, too small, and the bones in her hips showed, though neither sign of malnutrition detracted from the sublime beauty of her legs. Ollie appreciated her only as an *objet d'art*, not as a source of gratification. He was a man ignorant of women and—even more importantly—had long ago rejected even fantasies of copulation. Until now, he had lived in a sexless world, driven there by hands which any lover would instantly have recognized as more than ordinary.

He placed his hands at her temples, smoothed her hair, traced his fleshy fingertips across her forehead, cheeks, jawline, chin. He felt the pulse at her neck, pressed her breasts, stomach, legs, seeking the cause of her illness. In a moment, he knew: she had overdosed. He could also sense something he did not want to believe: the overdose had been intentional.

His hands ached.

He touched her again, moved his hands in lazy circles

until he was not sure where his hands ended and her skin began, until they seemed to have melted together, like people made of smoke. Half an hour later, she was no longer comatose, merely sleeping.

Gently, he turned her onto her stomach and worked his hands along her back, shoulders, buttocks, thighs, finishing what he had begun. He traced her spinal cord, massaged her scalp, blanked his own mind as the power seeped out of him and changed her. Fifteen minutes later, he had even taken away her desire for dope as well as cured her current illness. If she even thought of shooting up again, she would become violently ill. He had seen to that. With his hands. And then he leaned back in his chair and slept.

He bolted out of his chair an hour later, pursued by nightmares he could not identify. He went quickly to the door, found it locked, peeped through the curtains. He had expected to find someone lurking there, but he found only the night. No one had seen him use his hands.

The girl was still asleep. As he pulled the sheets over her, he realized he didn't even know her name. In her wallet, he found identification: Annie Grice, twenty-six, unmarried. Nothing more, no address or relatives' names. He lifted a glass bead necklace but received no images from it, decided it had been newly purchased and put it back. In her well-worn billfold, he discovered a wealth of impressions, a fiercely compressed picture of the last several years of Annie's life: her first cocaine purchase, use, subsequent dependence; her first time with skag, dependence, addiction; theft to maintain the habit; jobs in less reputable bars, hustling drinks; prostitution that she called something else to satisfy her conscience; prostitution that she called prostitution; finally, irrevocably, a disassociation from life and society, a solidified loneliness that welcomed the release of death.

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He put the wallet down. He was drenched with perspiration.

He wanted wine, knew it would do no good. Besides, his curiosity had not been fully satisfied: how had Annie Grice become the woman the seven-year-old wallet testified she was? He found an old ring—family heirloom?—in her purse, held it and let the images push into him. At first, they did not concern Annie. When he saw he was sensing back to the earliest history of the ring, he let his mind slide forward along the time track until Annie appeared. She was seven; the orphanage official had just given her what few artifacts remained of her heritage after a fire had destroyed her home and parents six months before. After that, her life was a string of depressing events: she was shy and became the target of malicious playmates; her bashfulness compounded her loneliness and kept her friendless through the formulative years; her first love affair was a disaster that left her afraid of human contact more than ever before; with no money for college, she went from one clerking job to another, unhappy, confined, alone; in time, she tried to overcome her timidity with a brash but hollow aggressiveness which achieved nothing but the acquaintance of a morally questionable young man named Benny with whom she lived for a year and with whom she first snorted coke; after that, the steps of her addiction—her escape from loneliness—followed what Ollie had learned from sensing the images that permeated her tattered wallet.

He dropped the ring, went and got his wine. He drank until—mercifully escaping the depression that was not really his but Annie's—he slept.

The girl woke him. She sat straight up in bed, stared at him where he slumped against the wall, and she shouted.

He got up, swayed toward her, blinked stupidly, sleepily, drunkenly.

"What am I doing here?" she asked, clearly frightened. "What did you do to me?"

Ollie said nothing. He found it impossible to speak to anyone. He may have been mute, or he may have been afraid of words. His hands were shaking, moist and pink. He shook his head, smiled at her, hoped she understood he only wanted to help her.

Apparently she got it right, for she looked less frightened. She pulled the sheets to her neck to cover her nakedness, frowned. "I'm not dead, even though I odeded."

Ollie smiled, nodded, wiped his hands on his shirt.

Her eyes widened with an awful terror as she looked at her needle-tracked arms: it was a terror of life, a fear of existence. She began to scream, head thrown back, hair a golden frame about her white face.

He reached her quickly, touched her, sensed out, put her to sleep. Sobered, he went to the door, peered out where early morning light touched the shabby concrete steps, closed the curtains again, satisfied that her scream had not alerted anyone.

In the bathroom, he splashed cold water on his face and wondered what to do now. He even considered carrying her back to the alleyway where he'd found her, abandon her to her own devices. But he could not do that. He didn't know why he couldn't, and he didn't attempt to reason it out—he was afraid of the answer he might get.

Drying his face on a filthy hand towel, he realized he was a sorry sight. He bathed, shaved, dressed in clean clothes. He still looked like a vagrant, but as if he were one by choice. For a reason. (A disillusioned artist. A rich man escaping the boring responsibility of wealth and position . . .)

He was surprised by this fanciful turn of thought, for he considered himself a man of routine and restricted vi-

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sion. Unsettled, he turned from his reflection and went into the main room, looked at the girl. Sleeping, she was serene, pure. He would let her sleep a while yet.

Three hours later, finished cleaning the two small rooms, he changed her bedclothes while she slept. Even while admitting the impossibility of the notion, he toyed with the prospect of keeping her asleep and tending her like this for years. He knew he would be happy doing that.

By now he was hungry, and knew she would be, too, when she woke. He left the apartment, locking the door behind him. Two blocks away, at a small grocery, he bought more food in one order than he had ever done before.

"Twenty-eight dollars, twelve cents," the cashier said. He did not conceal his disdain. Clearly, he felt Ollie could not pay.

Ollie raised a hand, touched his head, stared hard at the cashier.

The man blinked, smiled tentatively and folded his hand over empty air. "Out of thirty dollars," he said. He carefully placed the nonexistent bills in the register and handed Ollie the proper change, bagged the food.

On his way home, Ollie was uneasy; he had never before used his power to cheat anyone. If the girl hadn't come along, he wouldn't have required so much food—he would have finished his previous night's work at the garbage cans, could have completed another set of silverware and earned a few bucks. Therefore the responsibility for the deceit was not entirely his. Still vague, half-remembered portents of disaster circled in the back of his mind.

At home, he prepared a dinner—stew, salad, fresh fruit—and woke Annie. She looked at him strangely as he pointed at the laden table. He sensed her blooming terror, a red flower. He swept his hand to take in the cleaned and ordered room, smiled encouragingly.

The girl sat up, propelled into her nightmare again, and she screamed.

Ollie raised his hands imploringly, tried to speak, couldn't. Blood rushed to her face as she sucked a deeper breath and tried to pull herself out of the bed. He was forced to lay hands on her and put her to sleep again.

Tucking her in, he knew he had been naive to imagine that she would be a different girl, with fewer fears and more composure, simply because he had bathed, shaved, cleaned the apartment and cooked dinner. She would only be different if he helped her; that would take a great deal of time and labor.

He threw the food away. He was no longer hungry.

Throughout the long night he sat by the bed, elbows propped on knees, head held between his hands. The tips of his fingers seemed to merge with his temples while his palms lay against his cheeks. He sensed into her, sensed her despair, hope, dreams, ambition and limitations, joys and hard-won knowledge, her persistent misconceptions and her intellectual surety. He dwelt in the center of her soul which was, by turns, beautifully in bloom and withered by decay.

In the morning he used the bathroom, drank two glasses of water, forced her to drink while keeping her more than half asleep. Then he settled into the chiaroscuro world of her mind and remained there, except for brief rest periods, all that day and night, diligently searching, learning, making cautious adjustments to her psyche.

He never wondered at this expenditure of time and energy, perhaps because he could not face the ultimate understanding that his motive was loneliness. He merged with her, touched her, changed her, and gave no consideration to the consequences. By dawn of the next day he was done.

Once he had partially wakened her and made her drink to keep from dehydrating; then he once more put

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her under completely and lay beside her on the bed. He took her hand in his and, exhausted, slept, dreaming that he floated in a glassful of water, a mere speck, about to be consumed by an enormous mouth. Curiously, the dream did not frighten him; he was resigned to the grotesque fate. It was as if he had expected to be swallowed up all his long life.

Twelve hours later, Ollie woke, showered, shaved, dressed and prepared another dinner. When he woke the girl she sat straight up, again bewildered. But she did not scream. She said, "Where am I?"

He worked his dry lips, instantly unsure of himself again, finally managed to sweep his hand around to indicate the room that by now must be at least somewhat familiar to her.

She appeared curious, perhaps ill at ease, but no longer possessed by that major fear, the fear of life itself. He had cured her of that. She said, "You've got a cozy place. But . . . how'd I get here?"

He licked dry lips, searched for words, found none, pointed at himself and smiled.

"Can't you speak?" she asked. "Are you mute?"

He thought a moment, opted for the out she offered, nodded.

"I'm sorry," she said. She looked down at her bruised arm, at the hundreds of needle marks, doubtlessly remembering the overdose she had carefully prepared and boosted into her bloodstream.

Ollie cleared his throat and pointed to the food on the table.

She instructed him to turn his back, then got out of bed, stripped off the top sheet and twisted it about herself like a toga. She went to the table and sat down, grinned at him. "I'm starving."

He grinned back. What could have been the worst moment had passed without much strain. He put the food

on the table and made a disparaging gesture to indicate his lack of culinary finesse.

"Everything looks delicious," she said. She reached for the main serving dish and began to heap food on her plate. She did not speak again until she had eaten.

She tried to help with the dishes, though she soon tired and had to retreat to the bed. When he finished and sat in the straight-backed chair beside her, she said, "What do you do?"

He shrugged.

"For a living, I mean."

He thought of his hands, wondered how he would tell her about them even if he could talk. He shrugged as if to say, "Nothing much."

She looked around the shabby room and said, "Pan-handling?" When he did not respond, she decided she had hit on it. "How long can I stay here?" By gesture, expression and pantomime she was made to understand that she could stay as long as she liked. When this was clear, she studied him a long moment and finally said, "Could we have less light?"

He got up and switched off two of the three lamps. When he turned back to her, she was lying nude on top of the covers, her legs slightly opened to receive him.

"Look," she said, "I figure you didn't bring me here and nurse me for nothing, you know? You expect a . . . reward. And you have a right to."

Confused, frustrated, he went and got clean sheets and, ignoring her offer, proceeded to change the bed under her without touching her. She stared at him with utter disbelief, and when he was done she said she did not want to sleep. He insisted. He touched her and put her out for the night.

She ate breakfast with the greedy efficiency she had evidenced at supper the night before, wasting nothing,

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then asked if she could take a bath. He washed dishes while her sweet voice came through the bathroom door, engaged in a long, melodic song, that she repeated over and over.

She came out of her bath fresh, clean, hair dark as burnt honey, and stood nude at the foot of the bed. She beckoned to him. Already she seemed sleeker, healthier than when he had found her, though she was still leaner than she needed to be. She said, "I was stupid last night. My hair was a dirty mess and my body odor would have turned off a bull. Now . . . I'm soapy-smelling."

He turned away from her and looked at the few dishes he had to dry.

"What's the matter?" she asked. He had no reply. "You don't want me?"

He shook his head, no.

He thought he heard her draw a sudden, deep painful breath. A moment later something struck him painfully on the hip. Turning, he realized it was the girl wielding a heavy glass ashtray. Her lips were drawn back over her teeth, and she was hissing at him like an angry cat. She pounded his shoulders with the ashtray, struck him repeatedly with one tiny, balled fist, kicked, screeched. Then, abruptly, she lost her grip on the ashtray and sagged against him, exhausted, crying. He put an arm around her to comfort her, but found she had enough energy to twist violently away. She turned, tried to reach the bed, stumbled, fell, passed out.

He lifted her and put her to bed.

He pulled the covers around her, tucked her in and sat down in his chair to wait for her to come around.

When she did, half an hour later, she was trembling and dizzy. He soothed her, smoothing her hair away from her face, wiping her teary eyes, placing cold compresses on her brow. In time, when she could speak, she asked, "Are you impotent or something?"

He nodded, negatively.

"Then, why? I wanted to repay you. That's how I repay men. I don't have anything else to give."

He touched her, and held her; with his expression and with his clumsy pantomime he tried to make her understand that she had a great deal to give. She was giving just by being here. Just by being here.

That afternoon he bought her pajamas, streetclothes, and a newspaper. She approved, amusedly, of his taste in pajamas: full-sleeved and long-legged flannels. She put them on then read the comics and human interest stories to him. She seemed to think he could not read and he was willing to go along with the misconception, since his illiteracy tended to reinforce his role. Winos did not collect books.

The following morning she dressed in new jeans and sweater and accompanied him to the grocery store, though he tried to dissuade her. At the cash register, when he handed the clerk a nonexistent twenty dollar bill and collected change, he thought Annie was looking elsewhere. Outside, as they walked home, he found she'd been alert. She said, "How'd you do that?"

He looked perplexed, as if he didn't understand.

"Don't try to fool Annie," she said. "I almost croaked when he grabbed a handful of air and gave change." He said nothing. "Hypnotism?"

Relieved, he nodded: *yes*.

"You'll have to teach me."

He made no response.

But she was not going to be put off. *You got to teach me how you conned that guy—with that little trick I wouldn't need to hustle my body anymore, you know? Christ, the way he smiled at that handful of air! How? How? Teach me! You got to!*

Finally, unable to listen to her any longer but afraid that he would be foolish enough to tell her about his hands, Ollie shoved her away from him—shoved hard.

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The backs of her knees caught the bed and she sat down with a thump, surprised by his sudden anger. She said no more and their relationship returned to an easy pitch. Unfortunately, since she could not nag him about learning the con game, she had time to think. Late in the evening, she said, "I had my last fix days ago, but I don't feel any need. I haven't been this long without it for five years."

He held his hands out to his sides to indicate his own puzzlement.

"Did you throw away my tools, the skag?" He nodded. A while later she said, "The reason I don't need dope—is it you, something you did? Did you hypnotise me and make me not want it?" When he nodded, she said, "The same way you made the clerk see the twenty dollar bill?"

He agreed, using his fingers and eyes to do a comic imitation of a stage hypnotist hamming it up for an audience.

"Not hypnotism at all," she said, looking at him, seeing through his facade as no one had done in years. "ESP?" She looked at his eyes but, he was relieved to see, not at his hands.

"What's that?" he asked with gestures.

"You know," Annie said. "You know." She was a more observant girl, a much brighter girl than he had thought.

She began to nag again, not about the con game any longer. *Come on, really! What's it like? How long have you had it? Don't be ashamed of it; it's wonderful! Be proud! You have the world on a string!*

Sometime during the long night—later, Ollie could never place the moment, or understand what single telling argument she used to finally break him down—he agreed to show her what he could do. He was nervous, wiping his hands on his shirt; he only vaguely remembered what it had been like to show anyone his abilities, but he was afraid of the consequences. He handed her a non-existent twenty dollar bill, made her see it, made it

disappear. He levitated a coffee cup (empty), a coffee cup (filled), the straight-backed chair, a lamp, the bed (empty), the bed (with Annie in it), and finally himself so that he floated off the floor like an Indian fakir. The girl whooped, hollered, made him give her a ride around the room on a broomstick of air, hugged him, kissed him, asked for more tricks. He turned on the water in the sink without touching the faucet, divided the stream into two streams that fell on both sides of the drain. He let her throw a cup of water at him and diverted it from him in a hundred different sprays, remaining dry himself.

"Hey," she said, more flushed and excited than he had seen her, "no one is going to tramp on us again, ever. No one!" She stood on her toes and hugged him. He was grinning so hard his jaws ached. She said, "You're fabulous!"

He knew, with sweet anticipation and awful dread, that one day soon they would be ready to share a bed. Soon. From that moment his life would be changed. She still did not fully understand what his talent meant, what a wall between them his hands could soon become.

She said, "I still don't understand why you hide your . . . talent."

He understood though, for he that night broke down years of solid forgetfulness and came through into the hideous memories of childhood which he had long suppressed. He tried to tell her, first with words that wouldn't come and then with gestures, why he hid his abilities. Somehow she understood the gist of it. She said, "They hurt you."

He nodded, yes. Very much.

The talent came upon him without warning when he was twelve, as if it were a secondary sex characteristic accompanying puberty, manifested in modest ways at first then increasingly strong and demanding. It was the sort of thing a boy knew must be concealed from adults. For months he even hid it from other children, from his

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friends, confused and frightened by his own hands in which the power seemed to be focused. Slowly, however, he revealed himself, did tricks for his friends, performed, became their secret from the grown-up world. But it wasn't long until they rejected him—subtly at first, then with increasing vigor until they beat and kicked him, knocked him in the mud, forced him to drink filthy water—all because of his talent. For a time he hid his powers again, even from himself. But as the years passed he learned he could not conceal and deny the talent without causing himself great physical and psychological damage. The urge to use the power was a physical need stronger than a craving for food, for sex, for life itself. To refuse it was to refuse to draw breath; he lost weight, grew nervous and ill. He was forced to use the power then, but refrained from exhibiting it in front of others. He began to understand that he would always be alone—as long as he had the power—not from choice but from necessity. Like a musical talent, a cleverness with words, it could not be successfully hidden in company: it flowered, unexpectedly, startling friends. And when he was found out friends were lost, and the consequences were more dangerous than he cared to face. The only sensible life was as a hermit. In the city he naturally became a vagrant, without position or responsibility, unnoticed, friendless, safe.

"I can understand people being jealous or afraid of you," she said. "Some of them . . . but not everyone. I think you're great!"

With gestures, he explained. Twice he grunted, trying words, discarded them, anxious to share the burden of the past.

"You read their minds," she interpreted. "So? I guess everyone has secrets. But to hurt and try to kill you . . ." She shook her head sadly. "Well, you don't have to run away from it any longer. We'll face it, you and me; we'll beat it."

He nodded, yes. But he was deeply sorry to have mislead her, for at that moment the *mesh* occurred. Like that: *flick!* And he knew that this time would be no different from others. When she learned about the mesh, she would panic . . .

The next day Annie was making plans for their future while he listened and shared, watched her with possessiveness. All day he enjoyed planning with her, for he knew that soon there would be no more joy to share, none at all, nothing. The mesh made joy impossible . . .

After supper, as they lay on the bed holding hands, the trouble began just as he had known it would. She was quiet a long time, thinking, before she said, "Have you been reading my mind today?"

It was useless to lie. He nodded, yes.

"Very much?"

Yes . . .

She said, "You know everything before I say it."

He waited, cold, frightened.

"Have you been reading my mind *all day long?*"

He nodded, yes. She frowned, spoke firmly this time: "I want you to stop it. Have you stopped?" He said he had. She sat up, let go his hand, looked closely at him.

"But you haven't. I can almost . . . *feel* you inside there, watching me." She took his hand again. "Don't you understand? I feel silly, rambling on about things you've already seen in my head. I feel like an idiot in the company of a genius."

He tried to calm her, to change the subject. He croaked at her like a magic frog with pretensions to princehood then, resorted again to gestures.

She said, "If we both . . . This one-way thing makes me feel . . . inadequate. I don't like it." She waited, then: "Have you stopped?" He indicated he had, but she said, "You're lying. I feel—I'm sure I can feel . . ."

Then the terrible realization came to her, and she

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drew away from him. "Can you stop reading my mind?"

He couldn't explain the mesh, the way, when he had come to care enough for her and know her well enough, they had slid together. He could not explain that she was now almost like an extension of him, a part of him. He could only nod, no. *I can't stop reading your mind, Annie! It comes to me like air to my lungs.*

Thoughtfully, she said, "No secrets, surprises, nothing I can keep from you." Minutes passed. Then: "Do you begin to run my life, make my decisions, push me this way or that, without me knowing? Or have you already begun to do that?"

That was beyond his power, though she would never be so convinced. Breathing fast, she held that unreasonable, naked fear he'd seen often before.

She said, "I'll leave right now . . . if you'll let me."

Sadly, he touched her mind and brought her temporary darkness.

That night, while she slept, he sensed into her mind and erased certain memories. He kept the wine jug at his feet and drank while he worked. Before dawn, he was done.

The streets were dark and empty when he carried her back to the alley where he'd found her, put her down and placed her purse under her. He went home without taking a last look at her clear, perfect face, as he desired.

He opened a new jug of wine. Hours later, drunk, he unaccountably remembered what a childhood "friend" had said when he first displayed his power: "Ollie, you can rule the world! You're a superman!" He laughed out loud, now, spitting wine. Rule the world! He couldn't even rule himself. Superman! In a world of ordinary men, a superman was no king, not even a romantic fugitive. He was simply *alone*. And alone, he could accomplish nothing.

He thought of Annie, of moments and flesh unshared, futures destroyed, and he continued to drink. After mid-

night of that day, he went to check the garbage behind Staznik's Restaurant for tableware. At least, that was what he intended to do. Instead, he spent most of the night walking swiftly down a succession of dark, twisting alleyways and sidestreets, his hands held out before him, a blind man trying to find his way. As far as Annie was concerned, he'd never existed.

Never . . .

Jimmy Eight lives an ordinary life on an extraordinary street . . .

Merlin Street

W. MACFARLANE

We lived on Merlin Street off College Avenue, my parents, my older brother and sister, my grandparents and I. Kales Avenue was on one side and Taft the other way. The Winklemans lived next door in a cobble rock bungalow and I forget the name of the sweet old couple downhill in the shingled cottage. I hated their guts.

"I'll smack you," said my mother, "if you tell Mrs. What's-her-name to blow it out her barracks bag again. She is a lovely, sweet old lady and you had better stand still by Christ, if she wants to pat you on the head."

My father said, "I object to the euphemism. Don't bowderlize, Jimmy. Keep your mouth shut and take it like a man."

"She wants to lay hands on me," I said. "All this cooing and patting is enough to make a buzzard puke."

"That's better," said my father. "It is enough to make a buzzard puke—but only in the bosom of your family. And don't give me any cloth-headed crap about hypocrisy. Anyone with the brains of a chipmunk suits himself to the world he makes."

"I counted just the other day," said mother. "I speak twenty-eight different kinds of English to the sixty-five people with whom I am in some sort of rapprochement during the month."

"The first rule is to be real," said my father. "The

second rule is to be real. Want to try for the third rule, Jimmy?"

"Be real," I said, but I forgot.

Merlin Street was built up fifty years ago when you bought a lot and hired a carpenter for fifty cents an hour. Our two-story white house was unlike any other, but all the houses were made of full dimension lumber and had a tendency to diamond panes of glass and big front porches. We had two enormous pepper trees buckling the sidewalk in front of our house, and other people had flowering peaches or acacias or Japanese plums as the fancy took them.

I figured I lived in a perfectly ordinary family until I went to school. Mother did fancy cookery at home and fancy typing for researchers at the University, Father and Grandfather commuted to San Francisco where they imported things, Grandmother attended the courts in Oakland and wrote true confessions, my sister Heloise was a dental technician and my brother Carl went to the maritime academy and was 3rd mate on a freighter running back and forth to Taiwan. I'm James Eight and that was only one of the things that boggled my kindergarten teacher. "I'll take the fifth on that question," I told her.

Miss Binnitt bit her pencil. "All right, Jimmydee, you take the nice information paper home to your mother—"

"What is this 'dee' crap?"

She bit the pencil in two and said it was an abbreviation for dear. She was fumbling for a safety pin to fasten the note to my shirt, but she forgot it and said to run along like a dear little chap. So I did and caught hell at home. "There she was sweating bullets—" I said and Mother said, "Horses sweat, men perspire, women glow—" and Father said, "Men piss, women pee and children tinkle?" and Mother said, "It comes to the same thing," and Father said, "James Eight, persiflage aside, your brains are not in your butt but if you repeat this example of dull-mindedness I'll try driving the message home fun-

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damentally," and I wailed, "They're different!" and Father said, "Damn right and stop sticking your head out of the crowd."

After I learned what Miss Binnitt and the other kids had in mind, I enjoyed the difference. Children like role-playing. My progress was carefully normal and I graduated without prejudice from kindergarten. I entered into a more serious study of the world with Mrs. Armbuster in first grade. The second week of school I got busted for indecent exposure.

"It wasn't fair!" I told my mother. "It was a bum rap! That Dorene Hapgood said—"

"Well, girls *can*," Mother smirked.

"Like hell they can," said Father.

"Would you care to step out into the backyard?" said Mother.

"I have a little decent male reticence," said Father.

"She dropped her skirt just before Mrs. Armbuster—"

"Armbruster, Jimmy Eight."

"I couldn't get it in fast enough—besides I think Dorene saved up from the night before—"

"Against the wiles of this world," said Father, "discretion is often the better part of proof."

What Dorene Hapgood said was that girls could pee-pee farther than boys. I denied this allegation and she said if I was so smart I could prove it at the ten o'clock recess. So we met down by the acacias and she said ha-ha when I dribbled and then kept her cool when I arched a stream to the head of her shadow. She upped her skirt and put her hand down and hit my shadow head. Then she arched her back and hit my shadow hand when I reached up. Mrs. Armbuster caught me trying again. Dorene sniggered.

We lived about the middle of Merlin Street. I walked to school one way and to the liquor store on College the other. "Been down to the boozer again?" Grandma asked. I said, "Tootsie rolls and jawbreakers and rootbeer bar-

rels. No licorice whips this time." So I knew the street well. The Bixlers painted their house yellow, the Andersens put gravel in their front yard and planted cactus, the Schonhaftens kept plastic mushrooms and pixies on their lawn and every Christmas they put a stuffed Santa on the roof by the chimney. Old Virgil Sampe had a twenty-foot cube of aviary wire in his backyard and kept two hundred parakeets in it. Sometimes I walked down Kales or Taft and the houses and trees and people were all alike, though I suppose the casual passerby would find little difference. I think the city of Oakland did not like us very well because the asphalt was gray and the two manhole covers went clunk when somebody drove over them. There was an ancient jurisdictional dispute and we had to get our mail at the substation. The Pig Goat & Elephant trucks did not lop off our trees the way they did on Kales and Taft. We were not as tidy and we liked it that way.

The other children on the block were older than I. Paul could spit around corners and was getting on in years. He was in sixth grade and Glen was fifth, with better ears than an owl. Elinor had no hair on her head and we called her chromedome, though Mrs. Schonhaften bought her new wigs every September, brown for school, blonde for Sunday and red for special occasions. You did not call her chromedome unless you were close to sanctuary because she could run like a shadow.

There was a four-year-old kid named Fontaine Scrothose, but she didn't count. She was too young and spent most of her time with her dolls. I got along with the older kids because of our pepper trees. There is something heroic about climbing a tree. Your perspective changes with a little elevation and one of the happy memories of childhood is the four of us on our different branches near the sky in a leafy world.

"Car turning the corner," said Elinor.

Glen said, "It's Mrs. Haneau. The power steering

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makes that wheedledee noise. She's been shopping because I can hear the bran flakes in the box and the beer sloshing in the cans." His ears stuck out a little but not much, and he could hear worms going to bed at night. I had given up envying him.

Elinor said, "You guys hog the best places. I'm going out on this branch." I said it was skinny and Glen said pepper trees are brittle and Paul said nothing. We did not expect much conversation from Paul up the pepper tree.

Glen said, "I hear brakes on College for the turn. It's a stranger. Hey, Elinor, that branch is starting to go eepy-creepy." He shifted his position and said, "Wow, another target behind it!" His mouth worked the way it does. Elinor was highest on the skinny branch and farthest out over the street.

"Here it comes," I said, "here it comes!"

We all spit. Glen missed sideways, Elinor spit too soon and the cotton I spat got tangled with a cluster of red pepper berries. Paul laid a goober on the middle of the roof, just beautiful.

Elinor made me laugh she looked so disgusted. The second car was coming. She lurched out a little farther and the branch broke. She fell slowly and I held out my hand. Glen said, "Sheesh," Paul spit a little one this time right in the middle again and Elinor spit on the trunk from the middle of the air. I tugged her over to the branch and Paul said, "It's not fair," and she said, "I got it, didn't I?" and I said, "You scare me to death. Don't do it anymore," and Glen said "Sheesh" again because he'd missed twice in a row. Paul said, "You cheat!" and Elinor walked through the air the way she can and kicked his ankle and scrambled down the tree and went home mad.

That's the way they act, that's the way it is with girls. They're different. Glen thought they were like cats and we were like dogs, but Paul believed they came from Mars and all this stuff our parents told us was cover up.

"On Barsoom they lay eggs. I know because I read a book." He loaned me the book and everything he said was true. I called her Incomparable Dejah Thoris and she didn't catch me because I slammed the door, but when I called her Incomparable on the way home from school she made me eat grass. Could that girl ever run! I knew girls were different because I tried walking off the last step and jarred my spine and bit my tongue. I walked off the fence and got a lump like an egg on my head.

It turned out that everybody was different in a different way.

The What's-their-nameses next door were good. She made the best cookies I ever ate after you knocked off the powdered sugar. What are little girls made of, sugar and spice? I thought Mrs. What's-her-name contained corn syrup, sweetened condensed milk, sugar, hydrogenated vegetable oil, vanillin, natural and artificial flavors, BHA and BHT as freshness preservers. Mr. What's-his-name was ruddy and smiley and had a good word for everyone. He said things like, "A smile is a frown turned upside down," and "Lovely weather for ducks," and "Have a nice day," and I hated their bloody guts. They were not sanctimonious, they were simply cursed with the quality of being good.

Mr. Bixler was fiery down the street. He would go off like a string of lady finger crackers and his great fat wife would murmur and he'd sputter and pop to quiet, and pop again with a hangfire and snap once more with a delayed fuse. Every fall he would rake his sycamore leaves into the gutter and touch them with his finger and lean on his rake to watch them burn. When pollution laws were passed about burning leaves, Mrs. Bixler sat uncomfortably on the front stoop to soothe the cops if they came by. She was gray and fat and cheerful. Her voice was like a dessert we had from a package my sister brought home. It was an ambiguous yellow color, a gra-

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duated-bubble foam that rose from a nondescript jelly bottom to fluff as light as down, and probably equally tasty, if goose down has a synthetic lemon flavor. "Jesus, savior of my soul," said Grandma, putting down her spoon. Grandpa had a lot to say about the futility of recycling the liquid waste of the horse, my sister was indignant and ate her serving and said a dear friend gave it to her, and Father said the family didn't need enemies with friends like that, and Mother made coffee to cut the phlegm, she said, and I said it tasted just like Mrs. Bixler sounded. Her calm had the same gluey flavor and Mr. Bixler seemed to like it. My father said absentmindedly, "Everyone has some kind of talent—"

"What's mine?"

"You think loud—" he said, "—but let's wait and see."

My sister's talent was in pleasing the wholesale grocery salesman whose mouth she sloshed out in the dentist's chair, and they got married and moved to Los Angeles when I was in fourth grade. She was an unwilling participant on Merlin Street anyway, and so was my brother who showed up with a great wad of poker money which he wanted to invest in property. Father sent him to Mr. Scrothose, Fontaine's father, and Carl came back and said he had decided on Seattle real estate and would move up to Washington state, and he packed his things and left for good. "That kid sees through her skin," he told me. "She had a leather cap pulled over her eyes. She looked with her fingers when she played with her dolls. I've had it up to here—" he touched the end of his nose "—with these kooky people. Come and see me sometime, Jimmy Eight." That was when I was in fifth grade.

I thought everybody knew Fontaine saw with her fingers or skin or her tongue, near or far it didn't matter, but it seemed to disturb my brother, so I didn't tell him about Elinor and the Volkswagen. What happened was this car came rushing down the street and I guess Elinor

was in a snit because she didn't levitate out of the way. She just changed her weight to 872 tons. Her feet squashed into the blacktop two inches and when this Volkswagen with the faded plastic rose on the antenna ran into her, it stopped short never to go again, like the clock in the song. I thought everybody knew Elinor could change her weight.

I changed as I grew older. I knew about the Indians in Mr. Haneau's back yard. It was paved with green concrete and I could look in from the top of our trees and there was Mr. Haneau in his canvas chair drinking beer like he always did and swearing. When I was in sixth grade I was grown up enough to ask about his Indians.

"They appeared when I was a boy in Dorpington, Massachusetts," he said. "Nobody else could see them. That's why I studied History and Anthropology and languages, that's why I'm the leading expert on pre-Columbian natives of west coast Mexico, about Tepic or maybe San Blas. Jimmy, have you ever tried to lipread an unknown language? Talk about your Etruscan! Talk about your Egyptian musical notation! And how many tribes spoke how many tongues! And it's the luck of the draw when you dip into this grabbag—I might have had Tenochtitlan or Rome like Gibbon—but I got this bunch of timeless natives. Lordy!" Mr. Haneau led me through the gate at the side of the house. He said, "Pay no attention," when I hesitated to step into a section of clear, dark brown river. The ground rose from the water to three huts made of dried grasses bundled together. Small hairless dogs nosed garbage off to one side, two women were scratching and gossiping, the earth was beaten smooth with bare feet and some kind of fish covered with flies were drying on the thatch. The women did not see us as we approached, waist deep in the earth. I ducked as a parrot swooped low and perched in a tree. "What do you call this?" I asked.

"Vexation of the spirit," he said. "It's an image invasion

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to put the right name to it. I saw it first in Bumstetter's pasture one February morning. It's usually about one hundred feet in diameter but sometimes it's an oval twice as big. Those two girls are Violet and Rosemary—that's what I named them. Violet was born in 1950, a couple of years older than you—and maybe six hundred years older—kind of interesting birth ceremonies, and Rosemary was brought into the village four years later. They traded an old pirogue for her."

"Does the image move when you do?"

"There's a time lag, but it's Mary's little lamb." He brooded. "I have a window to the past and I'm fixed to it like a needle to a lump of magnetite." He was sad and proud at the same time. "You come back Jimmy, whenever you want to look. Even on our street, there aren't a lot of people who can see my Indians."

When I went to Junior High I got the job delivering the *Oakland Tribune* from Paul, who quit because he was athletic in high school. I picked up the papers at the drop on College, went down Ocean, back on Lawton, Taft and Merlin. The other streets were just streets with just people living on them, but I got to know my own better than anybody else, except maybe Mr. Scrothose who had Fontaine and the real estate office.

Ida and Idabelle Vandicar lived in the brown house buried in fuscias and hydrangias and bouganvillia. I never saw them before I started collecting. Paul's note said, "After dark," and they were night people. At 7:30 PM I could smell bacon and toast. Ida or Idabelle—they were twins—wore a fresh apron and a morning face. I never noticed before because I'd always been in the standard chronology. The lines on her face were smooth and the dreams not quite put away. "Jimmy Eight," said Ida or Idabelle, "how nice to meet you."

I also met Mr. Furverell who lived by himself. I had seen him before at the Elkington Cafeteria. Every other month my mother made us eat out to better appreciate,

she said, what we ate at home. Mr. Furverell was a patron of the Elkington. He weighed 110 pounds and in seventh grade I was taller than he, but the tray he loaded would have fed my whole family. "He chews fine?" I asked. "He needs energy," said my father. When I collected the *Tribune* money, I found he was the warmest and coldest man I ever met depending on the season. He radiated warmth in the winter and coolth in the summer. "I'm heat pumpy," he said shyly. "I have thermal control. Would you like a glass of lemonade, Jimmy?" I said yes and he poured lukewarm lemonade from a pitcher. I looked blank and he said oh. He held the glass in his hand for thirty seconds and ticked the rim with a fingernail. It filled with flakes of ice from top to bottom. It was very good lemonade.

It takes a while to confirm a child to his culture. It never quite took with me because I grew up on Merlin Street. I knew that being alive is perilous and peril is infinitely better than pursuit of the bitch goddess, Security. I tried that later. Oh, I had a savings account like any other kid, but whenever I filled out a withdrawal slip my mother signed without question. Most children Know It All when they're in high school. I was precocious. I knew it all in seventh grade.

Then sex reared its lovely head.

Not the explicit mechanics of reproduction with which my peers and I were weary by the time we entered third grade, but the fantastic peripherals. A nice-Nelly social ecologist might say that the fire touched off at puberty pollutes our lives. I think it's the greatest thing that ever happened. I was brought up in the tradition, "So how do you do it better?" and I cannot imagine a better way to keep a thinking animal entertained, to keep him going like crazy for as long as he lives. Otherwise, he says to hell with it and goes to sleep. This is what is puzzling about the idea of God. What keeps Him going?

Dorene Hapgood whispered, "Will you help make

posters Saturday morning, Jimmydee?" She had developed the whisper, mysterious eyes, a willowy walk and breasts. I said, "Yawrk." The janitor let me in and I went down the empty ringing corridor to the art room where three self-possessed girls and a guy named Ed Cayting were unrolling paper on the floor to paint campaign posters for the class election. Cayting was running for president and Caprice Lopez for vice and Dorene for girls league. When the banners were done, Dorene borrowed the ladder from the janitor and she and I put up the high ones in the corridors. I was hungry as a wolf by this time, impatient rather than embarrassed by the farty smell of the poster paint, and weary of artistic considerations. She steadied the ladder while I taped the poster and when I climbed down she walked her fingers up my leg and back.

"You're going to take me to the election night dance," she said. "Yawrk," I said. She climbed the ladder next time. This was the day when pantyhose were new and I found out her legs went on and on in shimmery silk to an inscrutable future. My sensation of hunger and impatience changed to a new kind of emptiness, an unfamiliar longing that scooped me hollow from clavicle to pelvis. When the last poster was hung, Dorene walked straight up to me and stopped six inches away. "Thank you, Jimmydee," she whispered. I went home with my eyes crossed. She had my attention like a mule hit between the ears with a two-by-four.

Mother had three hamburgers waiting with celery salt and dill pickles and tomato slices. When I was merely stupified instead of stunned she told me Mr. Winkleman wanted his lawn cut and I went over and did the job. It's an old reel cutter and Mr. Winkleman likes the noise and says it's better for the grass than beating it off with a rotary mower. He talks to everything that grows around his house and raises his voice and all our fig trees lean in that direction. Mrs. Winkleman kept up my strength

with blueberry pie and grape juice and said that Hector Laughlin wanted to know if I would help him with another project.

I spent the rest of the afternoon shoveling sand and cement into his mixer while he laid up the walls of number sixteen. I had helped with some of the others. They ran all sizes and colors and shapes in his back yard. They kind of worried me. Who wants to live in a house the shape of an hourglass with the opening in the top sheltered by a 10 foot diameter tin shield? There's one underground made out of pipes lined with plastic, and another on a central shaft eight feet tall. The newest house was conventional except for fourteen fog shower-heads in it and a lean-to for the heater, so it wasn't quite ordinary after all.

Anyway, the sting of my encounter with Dorene was rubbed away. My father drove me with the heavy Sunday papers and then Mother and Father and I went across the whaleback bridge and on past Glen Ellen to Ran App's ranch where they keep a winery and grape vines and a bunch of pasture and a high hill meadow and dirt roads where Mr. App lets me drive his pickup.

I suppose I was a little retarded because it wasn't until I was in tenth grade that a girl named Bernice Appleton showed me what it was all about by broad moonlight in the front seat of her mother's car parked in the Oakland hills. She was a dolt in school—I overheard Dorene say she couldn't walk and chew gum at the same time—but she was advanced in an area that grabbed me. We went at it hot and heavy for two weeks. She checked me out on all basics and we got caught in the darkroom of the high school paper by Mr. Holt, the journalism teacher. He said wearily, "Knock it off, kids," and took Bernice to the Dean of Girls and me to the Boys. Mr. Durward read me his routine, said I should regroup and reorganize, and Bernice was sent to a parochial school without a newspaper and I surfaced and looked around free of that

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miasmatic fog that held me obsessed since the election night dance.

With my head temporarily clear, I saw that my troubles began with Dorene Hapgood. Only Cappy Lopez got elected of our candidates. This was a traumatic sample of the uncertainty of the world to Dorene and she reacted with frenetic gait. Rome had fallen and she danced and flared like a guttering candle. She gave me a roundhouse slap in the patio off the multipurpose room, cried and kissed me and was cold and hot as Mr. Furverell.

The trouble was I saw anguished confusion in her eyes and was patient with her. There is nothing more infuriating. I was convinced by then that we are individual and alone in the world and responsible. This is an unpopular viewpoint. However fancifully I might dream of Dorene on a tropical island, I was blessed and cursed with the idea she was no figment of my imagination and it seemed proper that reason and emotion should coexist like prairie dogs, owls and snakes burrowed in happy community. So I was inwardly outraged and swore off women forever.

I spent a month with the Apps the summer before high school. I did all the things you do on a ranch and learned to speak ten kinds of English with the people who make up the rural scene. Merlin Street looked like home when I returned. The next summer I worked for two months and then went backpacking into the Sierras and Merlin Street seemed to run at more or less than a right angle to College, but after a while everything skewed back to normal. Victor Sampe had a heart attack and turned the parakeets loose before he died. The house was vacant for 5 months until a German-Swiss family moved in with three children and "quackless" ducks. Mr. Winkleman thought they were a great addition to the street because they were bug-callers. They grew a garden and everything flourished. So did the

Muscovy ducks because four times a day the towheads went out to the pen and called every aphid and grasshopper and snail in the neighborhood. Those Muscovies would eat anything.

That was the year I met Bernice Appleton and became a participant rather than a vicarious student of what Kipling called the Great Game but in a different sense. My parents were not alarmed when I was caught in sexual congress with Bernice. Grandma gave me a good talking-to about hotel rooms—her information was hopelessly out of date—and Grandpa cautioned me about beaches, one of those obvious things people sometimes overlook. Mother said never mistake a jar of Vicks Vapo-rub for Vaseline and Father, oddly enough, gave me the same advice. Mr. Furverell confided that in his experience girls who smoke cigarettes *will*, but this information was without merit. What really rocked me was when Mrs. What's-her-name mentioned erogenous zones I never suspected and when she said, "Be good," in her sweet way, I still did not like her, but I had another concept of goodness.

My nature is contrary. The way to lead me to a river is to force me the other way. I had fat, sarcastic Mr. Powles for math my junior year in high school. His courtesy was elaborate to the noodniks but to the few of us with some glimmerings of math brains, he was challenging and impossible. He tore strips off my back all year and was rude in the most courtly fashion to Dorene Hapgood. She did not stand a foot away and look in my eyes any more. She might say, "He's making out with the trig table," and I'd say, "He's queer for Mr. Boole," who invented a kind of algebra, but our comments were as neutral as the woman who sells male and female pipe couplings at the hardware store. We went our separate ways but I was aware of her as she was of me, familiar as the ocean if you live by the ocean or the mountains if you live there. Sublimation? Well, my junior year was

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spent in ardent sexual pursuit of mathematics. The people on Merlin Street were a little put-out with me. I didn't care about their opinions and we too settled into aware neutrality.

I worked that summer at a timber claim near Arcata splitting grapestakes and made enough money to afford an MGB badly beat up off a mountain road, but the engine and running gear were in perfect shape. I drove right past Merlin Street on my way home and had to go up Kales and back again. Fontaine was watching the camp of Indians in the middle of the street. She waved and moved aside. I nosed into the river and the whole camp swung on an imaginary pivot to Mr. Haneau's back yard where it belonged. The trees were thicker now. The PG&E had evidently given up anything more than cursory trimming. I got a pretty level reception from the neighborhood. Mr. Andersen was a metal-healer and while he soothed out the dings and whangs and bumps in the MGB, he told me that Paul was going to play football for Grambling, that Glen was making out like a bandit as a mechanic and Elinor was dancing in Reno—just about what might be expected.

High school started after Labor Day and I was the fair-haired boy of Merlin Street by the end of October. Mr. Powles took his hopefuls to the city-wide math contest and I was numero uno and Dorene placed eighth. For the rest of the year he really flayed me and you wouldn't believe what a math masochist I became—not so—it was more like finding a new hunger to satisfy in grottoed crystal with patterned, hidden pleasures.

This was not why Merlin Street patted me on the back and Mr. Bixler gave me three cans of his treasured Clemente Jaques jalapenos from Mexico, stuffed with tuna, ham and white cheese. "Lead in your pencil, boy." The idiom was strange but I got the message. Mr. Furverell invited me to his bachelor quarters to eat an enormous oyster stew. Mother laid in vitamin E. Mr. Schonhaften

gave me a box of avacados and a wink and asked the old riddle about why does the cannon roar and I said you'd roar like the ocean if you had crabs on your bottom, but it wasn't jokes or the math prize that won me popular acclaim.

It was Miss Lily Pringle. I had a social science requirement for graduation and she taught the class. She was wearing a burlap jumper when I saw her on the corner late one Friday afternoon waiting for the bus. She said, "I *would* like a ride, Jimmy. My starter's hung up, the man at the garage says. I tried rocking it in gear but it wouldn't break loose. You ever have your starter hung up?" I said, "No, Miss Pringle, but I'm sorry my heater's not fixed yet." She said, "I've been self-heating lately," and I said, "I'm glad I was going your way," and she said, "Mmm?"

She lived in a chicken-coop house behind a tall red-wood mansion in Berkeley. I carried her books and papers and she asked if I would like a hot drink and I said yes. She lit a fire in the Franklin stove. She had a great pile of newspapers in a corner and asked me to roll a few paper logs. She was a meticulous woman and the side-cutters and wire were just where they should be. The Franklin took the chill off the room and it was pleasantly warm by the time the coffee dripped. I stood on one foot and the other and said maybe I'd better go, and she said perhaps another cup? I said yes and it was warm and quiet in the little room. The fog was blowing thick and heavy outside.

"Jumper's too hot," she said and backed up to be unzipped. She stepped out of it in a gold challis smock, thin soft wool, and when I ran my shaking hands up her back there were snaps and sparkles of electricity. She turned to me with a deep breath. She turned again and I cupped her breasts. The challis was faithful, she wore nothing underneath and her nipples were an inch long. We drew the curtains in slow lockstep. Unless the challis

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lied, she had no body hair. It did not lie. We had a shower together and made love very simply on the bed. She shuddered briefly. Then we ate beef stew warming on the stove, and we drank burgundy and she sat on my lap and nipped my ears and lower lip and nipples with white, not-quite-squirrel teeth. She made me carry her in place to bed for the climax and she yipped that time and shook and shook.

I used the phone by the bed and told my parents I was staying overnight with a friend and they said fine, and we wrassled and she was on her knees and I held her breasts and she bucked and tossed her head and said "Aroo-aroo-aroo," and we fell asleep. I woke with Lily astraddle and this was the ride of the night, up and down and over the hills and when she halloosed we rode the white horses together, caught the big one and smashed in stars and foam and thunder on the shore.

We had a friendly morner and I went back to Merlin Street and Mother scrambled six eggs and I painted the front of the garage. She made me take a nap that afternoon—I heard her tell Father not five times on the best day he ever saw and he laughed and asked where she had been on his best day—and I fell asleep and went back to Lily that night.

I was indulged, cosseted and discreetly encouraged on Merlin Street, but I was so preoccupied with the delights of math and the activities with my friend that I took this kindly interest for granted and inquired no further. I spent at least one night a week with Lily for the next six months and got straight A's in her class but I earned them during the day and not at night. It was odd—I don't think we really liked each other except in our exercise of mutual compassion.

Six-year-olds can feel nostalgia for the good old days and it was nostalgia that made me ask Dorene Hapgood to the graduation prom. We had been through a lot together since kindergarten and I had a wary appreciation

of her qualities, just as I might admire a lady tiger with no intention of patting her head.

"You're silly," said Fontaine Scrothose, who was up our pepper tree watching the world below. Mr. Winkelman had taken his hibachi over to Mr. Bixler who obligingly stirred the charcoal with his finger. The Indians were back in the middle of the street. A family I didn't know very well had just moved in down the block. They were animal lovers and were taking the pets for their evening promenade, the three-foot high elephant, the giraffe with his head on a level with Mr. Kagami's shoulder, the rhinoceros and all the others, the four stairstep children with Mrs. Kagami bringing up the rear as tail-end Charlie. A quiet evening on Merlin Street.

Fontaine scrambled to the ground. "You're silly," she repeated. She was about fourteen, a skinny girl in blue jeans and a sweatshirt with a picture of a bearded man on it. "Who's he?" I asked. "Alfred C. Packer," she said and twisted her shoulders so I could read the inscription on the back: Have A Friend For Dinner. She faced me again with those lambent eyes. "The only man ever convicted of cannibalism in the United States." I have no idea what she saw with her eyes—"shapes of shifting lineage" crossed my mind—and they were never the same color; right now, in the early evening, they were warm brown.

"It's all very well with Lily because you don't gild her," said this bony child, "but you should be very careful with imaginary people like Dorene Hapgood."

"Come on, Fontaine—"

"Is the little piece of rubber a balloon, or the big globe that pops in your face?"

"Blown up by my imagination? What do you know—"

"Well, maybe you're not stupid," she relented, "even if you're all bands all stations on Merlin Street. Everybody likes to watch children have a good time and you sure think loud and clear, Jimmy." She sighed a very adult

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sigh. "Well, you'll just have to take your lumps, I guess. Be quick as possible."

The sun was down over the curve of the earth but still bright on high clouds. I felt fixed like a frog prince in clear golden jello by this earnest girl with the big eyes. We stood beside my polished yellow MGB with me all dressed up in the rented tux with a lace shirtfront and black shoes at an elegant gloss. She sighed again. "I suppose you'll do what you have to do."

"Okay, Fontaine," I said and broke the spell. I eased into the car and started the engine. "Goodbye."

"Oh no! Until we meet again," she said formally.

I drove down Merlin Street and glanced in my rear-view mirror. Mirrors are always spooky. Fontaine was tall pearl gray and her eyes were burning green. I stuck my head out and looked back. A skinny kid in a funny sweatshirt waved.

I turned right up College. When I left Merlin I was shaking. I had to park across from the Chimes. All stations? Loud and clear from the day Dorene out-peeled me? From that Junior High dance when I strapped my erection under my belt? From the hot jackrabbity with Bernice, the intimacies with Miss Pringle? Were all the people on Merlin Street watching and cheering and feeling with me when Lily did those things that made my eyes spin like pinwheels?

Was that my talent? Was that my hidden ability, to spread my guts out for the amusement of my neighbors? There was a guy named Philip Nolan who said screw the United States and I felt the same. Screw you, Merlin Street!

That night I fell in love with Dorene.

Merlin Street was cut from cardboard the next morning. The people were all right but I understood Paul, Glen and Elinor, and my brother and sister. Instead of going to Berkeley I went to San Diego State because the math department was not in the clouds—and Dorene

was going there. I joined the establishment and let my hair grow long and found a pad in Ocean Beach and sometimes I could persuade Dorene to stay the night and she would cry and we would make love and feel romantic and make love again unless she got mad.

When I went home for Christmas, Merlin Street was dingy. My parents were growing old. The people twitched with their sad delusions. I liked Mrs. Peters next door because she was sweet and good. I never saw Lily again.

Back in Ocean Beach I joined the Retail Clerks Union and worked at Safeway. Once you begin buying hi-fi equipment and Martin guitars and all the other goodies I had to believe in, it takes a major effort to climb out of the cesspool but I was shot in the ass with luck. Dorene stopped coming around. She said we'd always be friends. She played a great renunciation scene. She married a sincere graduate student in Business Administration.

I switched to UCSD and theoretical math, quit my Safeway job, starved on a scholarship, published two papers at the end of my junior year, worked at summer school and published another. They were honestly very high powered. I stopped looking like Prince Valiant, found a nice tweed coat at the Goodwill, and the word does get around in the academic ghetto and I had eight job offers on graduation. I went back to Oakland.

No Merlin Street.

There's a Merlin Court off Golf Links Road—I got a map and looked—but Merlin Street is not there between Kales and Taft. I saw the original plat at the city engineer's office. There never was a Merlin Street.

I can't say I was much surprised. I'd driven round and around, College to Kales to Broadway to Taft and back to College. I parked and walked the blocks and there was no Merlin. I thought this might be the case. If you know a street can skew off like a shifted overlay of reality, you can build field theory math to explain observed

Merlin Street

phenomena with some confidence. Merlin Street is real as the topless towers of Ilium or Camelot or Shangri-la, and they are a great deal more real than Warren G. Harding, say, or Rinso bright or Time magazine—talk about your hallucinations!

The mail works fine and I get regular letters from my mother, and I've written Mr. Scrothose about a house on Merlin Street and I have a research fellowship at Harvey Mudd and a deal cooking at Berkeley and I will not anticipate and I will not fantasize, but it's all right to be apprehensive, isn't it?

"Until we meet again," Fontaine said.

Just before I drove off I saw her under the green pepper trees, tall pearl gray and her eyes were amber and waiting, looking at God-knows-what. And me.

I feel like a bridegroom. So why am I sweating bullets?

Really, what can you say to a monster?

Audition: Soon to Be a
Major Production

EDWARD BRYANT

1

The steady clip-clop of steel-shod hooves raised a cloud of red dust that hung over the mesquite. Our llama pack train moved steadily onward into the knife-edged peaks of the Sierra Madre. It was our third day out of the tiny village of Pitiquita and we had left the Rio Yaqui to strike into the foothills. God, I hated northern Mexico! It was too hot, too sweaty. The hills were preternaturally quiet. It worried me . . .

"Senor Jordan!" The voice of Pablo, my mestizo guide, broke into the reverie.

"What is it, Pablo." I reined in the lead llama; the animal turned its head and regarded me dourly.

The swarthy guide clattered up abreast of me on his mount. "Senor, there is trouble in the wind. I can smell it."

"I wish there were some wind," I said. "It's too hot, too sweaty."

"A mere figure of speech," Pablo said, reverting to the precise English taught him in the white mission. "But I do sense something coming on. Maybe los banios . . ."

"Nonsense," I said. "The rurale lieutenant reported that the bandits were at least ten days' ride into the Sierra. Your primitive instincts play you false."

"Perhaps," he muttered. "But still—"

Audition: Soon to Be a Major Production

There was a sound high above and to the left of us. A rumble that started gently and rapidly became a roar.

"Rock slide!"

We stared transfixed for a moment on the narrow trail as boulders the size of Diesel locomotives cascaded around us.

2

Luckily a well-placed outcropping of granite diverted the main part of the slide so that most of the pack train was protected. Unluckily, the falling rocks obliterated a hundred-meter portion of the trail behind us, taking with it five llamas and two of the silent brown packers from the village. That left us with six llamas, four more packers, and Pablo.

"Well," I said, as the dust and noise receded down the mountainside. "It could have been worse."

"But for the grace of Dios," said Pablo, crossing himself.

"Certainly not! God had nothing to do with it. We are molders of our own destinies, all of us."

"Yes, Senor." The guide retreated to his characteristic sullen silence, face immobile as a carved Aztec god, inscrutable eyes searching the surrounding hills.

"Let's go," I said.

Four days and nights passed without incident. We penetrated ever farther into the Sonoran hills, deeper into the primitive Mexican wilderness. We became so far removed from civilization that aluminum cans no longer festooned the sage beside the trail.

On the seventh night we sat as usual around our smoky campfire. I measured out a portion of my remaining cherry blend—most of my tobacco having gone down with the rock slide—and tamped it into my briar. One of the silent villagers strummed his guitar.

Suddenly the night was split by the roar of a heavy-calibre rifle. A second shot! Desperately I reached for the Webley-Morse .44 at my side. I had a quick glimpse of shadowy figures leaping into the firelight. There were shouts. Then something crashed down upon my head and I plunged into an abyss of black crepe.

3

I awoke, disoriented for a moment, and realized I was lying on my back. Above was a burning taper in a bracket bolted to the rough rock wall. Then a figure moved into my vision and I must admit I stared. It was a lovely young Mexican girl, perhaps eighteen, her glossy black hair falling forward as she leaned over me. "Ah, you are awake, *Senor*?"

My eyes focused. I had said she was lovely. No, she was more than that. Much, much more. "Who are you?" My voice was a hoarse whisper.

"My name is Tostada Valdez." She smiled, teeth flashing white in the light from the torch.

She entranced me. Bewitched me. I tried to reach out to her.

"Oh no, *Senor*." She smiled again. "Please lay quietly."

"You mean *lie* quietly," I said.

"No, I mean lay quietly." She slowly began to unfasten the buttons of her white peasant blouse.

4

I slept and wakened and was ministered to by the girl Tostada Valdez. She explained that a bullet had creased my skull and that I had lain as one dead for two days before my first conscious interlude. She gave me uncounted bowls of thick, lifegiving corn gruel. My strength began to build and I felt I could almost hear the click-click of my skull knitting.

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Once, in the velvet darkness, she confessed, "I love you, gringo." She explained that attractive men were in short shrift here in the remote fastness of the Sierra Madre. Then she said something about "the white devil" and swore violently in an Indian dialect I didn't recognize. She was sullenly silent when I persisted in questioning her.

Then came one awakening when Tostada arrived accompanied by two rough-looking men with long moustaches drooping below wide sombreros. Cartridge bandoleers crisscrossed their chests. "You will come with us, gringo," said one. "El jefe wishes to speak with you," said the other.

I knew a psychological game was best. "And if I don't wish to speak with your jefe?" I smiled arrogantly.

The first man drew an ancient but serviceable revolver and deliberately pulled back the hammer.

5

"Ah, Senor Jordan. It is good to see you so recuperated." The speaker was short and powerfully built. One ape-like arm hung loose, fingertips brushing a knee. With his other hand he stroked the ends of an oily black moustache. "My name is Valdez. I believe you have met my daughter."

"Tostada, yes." I grinned ingenuously. She stood beside her father and even in the dusky light of the torches she seemed to be blushing. "I met her in the Biblical sense."

There was angry burst of dialect from one of the ragged brigands by the farther wall of the cave. It was the half-breed I had heard addressed as "Cojones." Cojones spat a curse and took a step toward me. He raised his weapon, a Husqvarna-Mangusta .370, and worked the bolt. As best I could, I assumed the yo-kai defensive stance.

Valdez uttered a sharp command and the 'breed lowered the muzzle of his gun. "Cojones is a jealous man, Senor," said the bandit chieftan. "You have made a deadly enemy."

I shrugged. Cojones stared evilly at me and spat again into the dirt.

"Enough of this pleasantry," said Valdez.

"I agree," I said. "What have you done with my pack train and my men?"

Valdez smiled. "They were all sent packing back to Pitiquita. I spared their lives, of course. Killing locals is bad for trade."

"White of you," I said.

"I am not an ungenerous man. Now, to business. Where is the ransom? We searched your strange fuzzy pack animals, but found no gold. No dinero. No jewels. Nada!"

"What ransom?" I said. "I'm an explorer for the National Geographic.

"You lie, gringo! You came here for one reason only; to get . . . to buy back—"

"Me, Valdez?" The voice came from an elderly white man in a filthy bush jacket and pith helmet who had stepped out of an adjoining cave. Beside him was a lovely young American girl, perhaps eighteen, her shining blonde hair falling down around her face.

"Well," I said. "Dr. William Randolph MacGregor, inventor of the DX/Weathercon. The man half the world's been looking for."

6

"How . . . how did you ever find me?" The old man's voice quavered. He swayed slightly and his daughter steadied him. It *was* his daughter, Angela. I recognized her from the four-year-old newspaper photos I'd studied.

"There were ways," I said.

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"No more talk," Valdez broke in. "I will talk. You, Jordan. You were to bring two hundred thousand American dollars in small bills."

"Was I?" I affected an air of nonchalance.

For the first time, Valdez seemed to lose some of his assurance. "Gringo, you are the man from Washington, aren't you?"

"I'm from Albuquerque," I said.

"Four years," Valdez muttered. "Four years I send the ransom notes, with no answer ever. Until now. You have to be the man from Tio Sam."

"Sorry," I said, "I'm just an honest every-day taxpayer. Never been to Washington D.C. in my life."

"Then you are useless."

"Oh, I don't know . . ." I said modestly.

"Then you die!" Valdez looked at me disgustedly. "I give you a fair chance, maybe. I let Cojones finish you off."

The half-breed gave a bestial grunt of anticipatory pleasure.

"Yes," I said. "A sporting chance. If I kill your man, do I live?"

"We see," said Valdez. "That eventuality does not worry me."

I quickly stripped to my waist and one of Valdez' ruffians handed me an eight-inch knife with a wooden haft. Cojones set down his rifle and extracted a similar knife from his boot. We faced each other within a circle of silent, heavily breathing men.

"Oh, be careful!" cried Angela, the professor's blonde daughter.

"Silence, gringital" hissed Tostada. "Or I kill you now."

I watched Cojones' beady marmoset eyes, anticipating his first move. It came with the speed of a striking snake.

7

Our death-duel was choreographed with a savage, deadly grace. Unfortunately I couldn't take time to appreciate the aesthetics. Cojones moved for a fast kill.

I ducked.

He lunged.

I stepped aside.

He recovered and thrust again.

I moved into position for a quick yo-kai number three throw. It was apparent my sophisticated fighting-knowledge would nullify his brute strength. But then I stepped on something round, a pine cone perhaps. I broke the fall easily, but my knife somehow twisted away and spun into the darkness.

The half-breed stood astraddle of me, laughing maniacally, his knife poised for the death-stroke. The glittering blade descended.

8

There was a sudden commotion in the mouth of the cave. Rifles spoke in deadly platitudes. With a look of extreme surprise on his coarse features, Cojones toppled over backwards, a neat black hole between his eyes. Pandemonium broke out among the bandits as they reached for their weapons.

"Robert Jordan, we have come!" rang the shout.

9

"Good show, my boy," said Dr. MacGregor, pumping my hand.

"Los bandidos never suspected we 'cowardly villagers' would double back," said Pablo.

Angela, weeping on my shoulder, said nothing, only breathed in my ear.

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Tostada, expiring from a ragged bullet wound above her heart, looked at me beseechingly from the rocky floor. "Gringo," she said pitiously, "I loved you. It was enough." And fell back.

My impassive villagers used their knives, beginning to finish off the surviving bandits.

"Well, let's go," I said.

"It will be so good to see Washington again," whispered Angela. "The cherry blossoms will be in bloom."

"You're not going to Washington," I said. "Neither of you. We're going where I can send a ransom note."

"Ah, Senor," said Valdez, "you are no better than me. Un bandido." Riddled with bullets, he was close to his reward.

"It's a living," I said. "Now let's move out. We've got a long trek back."

"One question, my friend," said Valdez. "Give a dying man his peace. How did you find out that I had abducted el Professor MacGregor and was holding him here?"

"Simple. I intercepted all your ransom notes. Every one. For four years I've worked in Albuquerque for the Postal Service. In the dead-letter office. The regional postal computer in Tucson sent us every one of your notes."

Valdez, a man bewildered in the face of eternity, looked stunned. "But why?"

I motioned with my rifle for Pablo to start moving us out. "You forgot to use a ZIP Code."

Sonora enveloped us in its clean, hot breath. After so many days within the caverns, I squinted against the bright sunlight. Pablo extracted a pair of Polaroid sunglasses from a saddlebag and handed them to me. "Good man," I said.

"I'll bet you are," said Angela, accelerating her llama abreast of mine with a kick to the ribs. I flashed her a grin as I turned in the saddle, surveying our straggling column of men and animals.

"Tighten them up," I ordered Pablo. "We look like the retreat from Moscow."

"Si, jefe." He reined his mount back toward the dust. Angela and I rode silently hip-by-hip for nearly a kilometer. "Jordan, you're a complex man," she said.

"Call my Bobby."

The trail narrowed; our inboard thighs brushed. Her leg twitched as with an electric shock. "Bobby," she said, "you're also a sexist pig."

"You're going to try to bribe me with your body," I said. "Don't blow the effect."

"You should be so lucky." The tone of her voice seemed dipped in curare.

Impulsively I said. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she said bitterly. "For four years my father and I have been prisoners. Do you know how many games of cribbage that makes?"

"You weren't ill-used?" I asked.

She blushed and looked away. "Used but not ill-used," she said in a low voice.

"You drew Tostada's jealousy."

"I spurned Tostada's advances."

"Oh," I said.

"Please," said Angela. "Please let us go."

I reached across and softly touched her cheek. "When the ransom is paid; then I'll let you go."

"You're a hard man."

"You bet I am."

We then rode along silently; I in another reverie, she in a snit.

First, there was the shadow. I heard an unearthly humming and smelled the odor of ozone.

"Senor, Senor!" Pablo shouted. "Above!"

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I looked up. The thing was enormous; a glowing, pulsing ovoid.

"Oh my God," said Angela. "What is it?"

"It would appear," I said, "to be a spaceship."

11

The spaceship (if in fact it were) hovered directly over us. I estimated its diameter to be at least a hundred meters. The hum cycled an octave lower; the craft's shining metallic skin shifted from silver to a dull black.

Our pack train dissolved into chaos as the llamas, skittish beasts at best, bolted into the brush. Several villagers, having great presence of mind amid the turmoil, raised their rifles skyward. I heard a ragged volley.

"Hold your fire," I shouted. "Bullets have no—"

I was interrupted by goutts of purple energy striking down among us like lightning bolts. It reminded me of firefights on Hill 141. One of the villagers nearest me fluoresced a brilliant lavender and exploded, spattering me with hot bits of flesh.

Gratuitous violence, I thought, looking around for Angela and her father. Then a dozen starshells seemed to burst simultaneously and I sank into unconsciousness.

12

I dreamed . . .

Strange, surrealistic fantasies of floating helplessly in tapioca.

Close behind me, something snuffled in the pudding.

13

We stared out through the metaphorical bars of our cage. I gestured at the barn-like spaciousness of the ship's interior. My fingertips touched and flattened

slightly against the invisible barrier enclosing our cell. "Monocoque construction, don't you think?"

"Definitely," agreed Dr. MacGregor. He stood beside me, wide-eyed with intellectual curiosity. "This is much more an engineering wonder than even Houston's Astro-dome II."

"This was never made on Earth," I said.

"Aliens?" Angela clutched at my wrist.

I put my arm around her shoulders protectively. "They seem to have a high level of technology. I shouldn't worry."

"Look what they did to Pablo and the other Mexicans!" Her voice crackled, nearing hysteria. I tightened my grip. With my free hand I stroked her hair.

"We fired on them first," said Dr. MacGregor. "Perhaps we frightened them."

"They killed them all," Angela said, beginning to weep.

"Not all," I said. "We're alive."

"I was speculating about that," said Dr. MacGregor. "The aliens clearly have a plan for us."

"Perhaps as ambassadors," I said.

"Vivisection," said Angela, sobbing louder.

"Hush." Her father patted her arm awkwardly.

Our cell was a five-meter square of some substance resembling red linoleum. The ceiling, three meters above us, was a duplicate of the floor. On all four sides the horizon was a distant, curved segment of hull. The lighting was indirect and dim.

A voice echoed through the shadows: "Your questions shall be answered. I would speak with your leader."

It was an ignominious journey. Paralyzed and prostrate, I was towed through the air like a corpse ready for

Audition: Soon to Be a Major Production

embalming. My conductor was a one-meter chrome spheroid with extensipods. I took it to be a robot.

"Good luck," Dr. MacGregor called after me. "Be careful," said his daughter. Their voices faded in the distance.

As I couldn't move my head, there was little to watch. Directly overhead the hull of the ship curved into blackness. I felt no sensation of motion. There was time to reflect.

I experienced no fear (though in the back of my mind I wondered if something extremely painful were going to happen). I realized the strongest emotion I presently felt was irritation—at this unexpected hitch in my scheme to ransom the professor and his DX/Weathercon.

It bothered me that a serendipitous spaceship should descend and interrupt my carefully wrought plans. It seemed a metaphysical injustice. I recalled Sir Roger L'Estrange in his *Fables of Aesop*: "Live and let live is the rule of common justice." I attempted to repeat the line aloud, but my lips would not move.

I felt a sudden vertigo and realized I was being pivoted upright. My skin prickled painfully, but once again I could move my limbs. I stood in a room enclosed by sheets of soft blue light.

Behind me, a voice husked, "Mr. Jordan, I presume?" I turned to confront the speaker.

"My name is Chiriloi," said the monster.

15

Really, what can you say to a monster?

16

My moment of shock cracked and then broke into a shower of psychic ice shards. I stared at Chiriloi, who sat

(set?) on a dais an arm's length away. Chiriloi was taller than I; aside from that, his differences . . . Can you imagine the head and fore-body of a bandicoot grafted to the trunk of a squid, complete with at least a dozen suckered legs? I know that extraterrestrial life-forms must theoretically evolve according to the physical conditions of their home worlds. I could not imagine what sort of planet might have created a being such as this.

"Good to have you aboard," said Chiriloi. The voice was husky and low, yet the rattish snout didn't move with the words. "You *are* Jordan? The survey people assured me you were."

I nodded.

"Let me answer your implicit question," said Chiriloi. "I'm speaking through a biopathic translator. We can't expect a perfect synch."

"Quite impressive, nonetheless." I attempted to sound assured.

"Spawn's play," said Chiriloi deprecatingly. "Our technology is usually more dependable." He folded four sets of arms. "I expect you have more questions."

"Where are we?"

"This spaceship is presently in a synchronous orbit some 36,000 kilometers above your planet. We are effectively masked from your Terran tracking systems."

"Who are you?"

Chiriloi hesitated, his bandicoot eyes crossing. "I must speak in analogs. I represent an organization you might call the Rigellian Cosmographic Society."

"Organization?"

"We create what you might term entertaining documentaries."

"What do you want?" I said.

"We are going to invade your Earth."

"What?" After all the similar scenes I'd read in bad novels and watched at the movies, the idea seemed ludicrous. I laughed.

Audition: Soon to Be a Major Production

Chiriloï's eyes crossed again. "Would it seem credible to you if I said we were here to assist your people in creating an Earthly paradise?"

"Not really."

"If we had come to help prepare Earth for membership in a galactic federation?"

"I'm afraid not."

Chiriloï twined half a dozen arms in a Gordian knot. "I must program a different approach. You will be returned to your compatriots."

"I have more questions," I said.

Chiriloï did not respond as the spherical robot rolled up beside me.

17

When I was returned to the cell, the three of us had a long and speculative discussion. We broached many fascinating theories but came to no conclusion. The robot brought us bland food-cakes and a bucket, evidently for the holding of organic waste. The lights dimmed and we went to sleep. Angela lay in my arms.

Our awakening was sudden; it took a few seconds for me to regain my orientation. During our sleep, the three of us had evidently been moved to a sort of laboratory. Apparatus glittered at the periphery of my vision. I tested my limbs and found I was incapable of movement except for my head. Angela, Dr. MacGregor and I had been placed at the corners of an equilateral triangle; we stood upright, facing the center. In the center was Chiriloï. I heard Angela's sudden intake of breath.

"What now?" I asked. "Are you going to kill us as you did Pablo and the others?"

"The brown men?" said Chiriloï. "I was attempting to function by your own cultural values. I thought it might put you at ease."

"It is the DX/Weathercon you're after?" asked Dr. MacGregor.

"A mere bauble," said Chiriloi. "We've had for centuries that simple device which could spell life or death for your world."

"You never answered Bobby," said Angela. "Are you going to kill us?"

"That depends upon your friend, Robert Jordan."

Angela and Dr. MacGregor stared from Chiriloi to me.

18

Chiriloi held a silver cube against my cheek; I felt a moist spray penetrate the skin. "This will ensure the truth," he said. "It contains artificial veracity enhancers."

"I can't feel a thing," I said.

Chiriloi removed the cube. "We will test it with a question. Tell me, Robert: what is it that you fear most?"

I concentrated; then tried to say, "Spiders." But my mouth said, "Impotence."

"Very good," said Chiriloi. "Now we start."

I said, "What is this?"

"A game."

"And the rules?"

"To be determined."

"Is there a prize?"

"Need there be?" said Chiriloi.

19

Cojones stood before me again. The halfbreed leered, testing the blade of his knife against the dark hairs on his wrist. He spat at my feet.

"Would you care if he died?" said Chiriloi.

"He's already dead. This is an illusion."

"Well, a sensory hologram." Chiriloi lashed out a tentacle and buried a cleaver in the side of Cojones' neck. The

Audition: Soon to Be a Major Production

image of the breed collapsed and died in a pool of blood. "You felt nothing?"

"No."

"We will continue." In rapid succession, Chiriloï recreated and mutilated images of my first-grade teacher, step-sister, priest, high school girl friend, John F. Kennedy, and my parents. My mother he killed ingeniously with a pair of parrot-nosed pliers, a tin of salt, and a plumber's friend. "You are not shocked?"

"No."

"Enough of images." Chiriloï moved to the corner of our triangle beside Dr. MacGregor.

"Oh no," said Angela. "Please don't."

"If this man dies," said Chiriloï, "his creation dies with him. Your world will be denied a device which could ultimately alleviate famine."

I tried to shrug. "I'd feel badly."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Dr. MacGregor died messily, like a disjointed chicken. Angela whimpered in her corner, futilely trying to look away. I did feel badly.

"Now," said Chiriloï, moving across the triangle, "the girl."

"I'd rather you didn't," I said.

"Do you care passionately?"

"I suppose not," I said.

Chiriloï used a selection of discrete acids, dissolving away Angela's tissues layer by layer.

At the end, Chiriloï and I stood alone amid the debris. "Well," I said, "do I win or lose?"

Chiriloï touched an opaque panel and I knew I was free. "You win."

It wasn't precisely the invasion of the Earth; but, like Dr. MacGregor's termination, it was messy.

I had the equivalents of a contract, an agent, and an enthusiastic studio. I'm told the production will gross an incredible amount in the Rigel System.

Chiriloï continued to speak in analogs. "Think of it," he said, "as something like your musical comedy."

I cannot imagine a sequel.

Preparing a planet for conquest is not necessarily easy, even for a superior being . . .

Day Dark, Night Bright

FRITZ LEIBER

He woke, feeling very refreshed and *thansig*, and instantly groped for the black plastic far-caller and punched the digits for Time of Day.

The firm, contralto voice came after the second ring. "The time is six forty-six and twenty seconds." Why did they use their females on so many jobs? Cheaper, he supposed. A very grasping planet, indeed.

Light filtered through the cheap drapes of his one window. Careless when alone, he wriggled to his feet, not bothering to feign bones and joints, and pulled wide the drapes. It was an overcast morning, the low clouds thick. Good! He detested bright Sol with its overdose of ultra-violet radiations. Why couldn't they have seven dull, clustered suns—*gentle* hydrogen-burning furnaces—as he had at home? And, of course, no (his thoughts hesitated at the horrible word) night.

He congratulated himself on picking the coastal, water-tempered city of San Francisco for his base. Only they didn't have nearly as much fog as he desired and they advertised. And they did have smog. Liars, liars, liars—, they deserved extinction. For dishonesty as well as for their (again the hesitation) night.

His three-orbed gaze—alone, he opened the third one, wrinkle-sealed, in his forehead—lighted automatically on the half-drunk bottle of rum on top of his midget refrigerator. It was good this planet had that liquid tranquiliz-

ing drug. How he hated solids! Solid food, to be chewed by his false teeth—another horror. But fortunately this *rum* (how queer to talk with sounds instead of thoughts) was almost as good as *thansiger* for waiting out, unconscious, the horrible night. Too bad he had run out of his supply of *thansiger*, but this had been an unusually long job. To be lost in complete dark—that was horrible and (but not quite) unimaginable. The seventh inner circle of Hell, as they called the place here.

For a moment his mind writhed back to his phone call. What a stupid species!—they really did deserve to be exterminated. They gave him Time of Day (though not Time of Night, thanks to Aahotisl!) But they never told you where you were, or which day of the month and week, and which year according to their Christ-reckoning . . . and one other detail which he for the moment forgot.

The clouds were thickening overhead. Good, good! He would have a comfortable working day by his calculations. It was getting beautifully cool and dark.

He took the elevator downstairs from his sixth storey. The street was strangely empty. He crossed it at an economizing oblique angle. He picked up at the bakery two plastic cups of coffee and two Danish. They were good starch when you'd scraped the almonds off and dug the jam out. But the bakery's trays were only half-filled and there were few Earthans about—sort of odd. He returned to his tiny apartment.

It was getting still darker. Good, good! Dull days were what he loved most—and all too infrequent on this planet. A lovely gloomy day—almost like Sartis, really. He got busy on the telephone. Quite a long job, but this was The Day. His careful preparations were paying off. He called Van Sittart about California and the whole West Coast. Everything ready for the earthquake. He called Siberia. Yes, it was all set to slide off into the Pacific and Arctic Oceans. India?—a famine unexperi-

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enced in her long history of famines. Africa?—suicide by inter-tribal warfare. Europe? (or, as the Americans sounded it, Yurrop)—atom-war, which would take care of the middle and eastern parts of the USA as well. The rest of the World (as they called it), well, fallout would do it. And so on, and so on (to get in the Polynesians, etc.) His listeners would let loose doom as soon as he called them a second time.

It was looking still darker outside his window. Good, good, good! A really Sartis day! Oh, how lovely to destroy a whole planet! Or maybe nine of them if his Solnova trick really worked.

He hesitated a minute there. Destroy! Destroy? He wouldn't like to have his wives and cousins destroyed on his home planet, no matter what evil they had done.

Five minutes to explosion. He paced about, then walked to the window, losing his way half-way. But he got there.

He had forgot that these Earthans did not work on the twenty-four hour principal, but divided each day (quite unreasonably) into twelve hours day and twelve hours . . .

. . . NIGHT.

And so he died.

Less than a man, he was incapable of acting in a way other than human . . .

By the Time I Get to Phoenix

THOMAS N. SCORTIA

He had tried to pretend that time did not exist, but the Arizona desert created time for him: quick seasons fired by a sudden flood, sprawling cascades of desert flowers withering in a day and spilling sere seeds onto the bleak sands, distant rumbles of lightning, the frantic scuttle of mating scorpions, the lazy rattle of a heat-drenched diamondback. Each of these marked time for him against his protest but he ignored these reminders, existing in a timeless suspension of life, seeking . . . cultivating . . . futility.

Until at eight in the evening, with the chill desert night tracing cold patterns on his back, he looked out the shack's window and saw a brilliant wash of flame gouge a blue ionized wound across the moon-splotched sky. The thing impacted a bare quarter mile away. Only the low swell of the desert floor saved his eyesight from the sudden blast of heat and radiation that erased the sky to a featureless white. The shock wave pounded at his body; for seconds his ears throbbed with pain.

Then silence. The desert night came rushing back and he was alone. Perhaps alone.

No, not alone!

A cry of anguish, unvoiced, internal. A wordless plea for help. There was no language. There couldn't have been words for the thought was so alien, but so filled with emotion and need.

By the Time I Get to Phoenix

He threw the light coverlet from his bare body and rose, pointedly ignoring the ugly scars that punctuated his nudity. He pulled on Levis (covered: his lower extremities must always be covered), denim shirt and sandals and ran from the shack. Outside the cold night air sucked the heat from his body. He ran up the low rise toward the impact point, feeling the voiceless pleading in his mind. At the crest of the rise, he stopped in wonder.

In the full moonlight below at a distance of a mile the desert floor was churned and fused in a vast circle. Whatever had struck here had vaporized in the incredible flood of heat that had washed over the desert flatness.

And again . . . pleading. Need.

Where? There . . . Here!

He ran, tumbling down the furrowed sand, tripping over scrub, his feet churning. At first it was only a black mass, sprawled in the sand. Then it was a form: human—certainly humanoid. Then it was . . .

Incredibly, he saw that it was a woman, nude, her thin arms outstretched, one leg drawn up in pain, her head raised, great slit-pupiled eyes staring at him out of a white alien face, tendriled whorled ears shifting in the desert breeze, thin human mouth opening silently, gulping air.

He was beside her in seconds. He put his arms around her shoulders and lifted her up. Her body felt oddly articulated in his arms but her odor was undeniably female, with a clean woman fragrance uncluttered by the powders and perfumes he had always despised in the women he had known. It was at this point that he noticed the lower part of her body. It was quite featureless. The genital area was completely smooth, completely asexual.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Her mouth opened, showing oddly shaped chisel teeth. A thin pink tongue quivered and she sighed, “All

right?" The sound came quite unaccented, clearly foreign to her tongue. He realized that she was only aping him, that she did not understand what he had said. His arm tightened about her and she sighed deeply, then tensed and in an instant fell limply in his arms, unconscious.

He lifted her, marveling at her lightness. She couldn't have weighed over ninety pounds. He turned and moved swiftly up the slope, holding her closely. Her head, resplendent in thick blue-black hair that tumbled in intricate coils, dangled limply over his arm. He kicked open the door of the shack and carried her through the single common room to the bed against the far wall, depositing her carefully, and straightening the bedclothing under her so that she could rest more comfortably. Again he noted the smoothness of her loins. He touched his own body in this area and shuddered, remembering.

Finally he adjusted the mantle-oil lamp and sat down on the edge of the bed. She stirred slightly as though disturbed in sleep and threw one arm over her head. The arm, he noted, was oddly muscled but the alienness of the musculature somehow accentuated the femininity of her body, throwing delicate contours about the breasts in high relief. He was leaning forward to inspect her face more closely when she opened her eyes.

They held a depth that made him inhale involuntarily. He felt for an instant that he was being drawn into them, that the wide slit-pupiled eyes were looking deep into his brain, examining what they found there and touching each thought, each desire, each pain with a delicate touch.

"All right?" she said faintly, echoing his earlier question.

"Where did you come from?" he asked. "What was it? A ship?"

"A ship?" she said in mindless imitation.

No, not mindless, he decided. Rather like a child,

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learning a language by mimicking. But the eyes . . . They were almost hypnotic, probing him, touching, seeking . . .

He jumped to his feet suddenly, his mind churning with anger. The touch of whatever had entered his mind had been embarrassingly intimate. Worse. Erotic. Erotic in a fashion he had never before experienced. He felt himself raging inwardly. What right did she have, alien or no? That sort of thing was not for him. He was cut off forever from such feelings of love and lust.

She saw that he was angry and she threw her hand to her mouth. Fear flickered in her eyes and her mouth opened, the long tongue quivering, searching for a word. "Wrong?" she asked.

He had not used the word. She was reading his mind. He had not used the word but she had found it in his mind. His thoughts turned suddenly cold at the idea. She could see into him, feel his emotions, paw over the deep and terrible anguish that afflicted him.

"Hurt?" she said softly. "It does hurt?"

"You goddam right, it hurts," he blurted and threw himself from the bed. Of course, it hurt. It had hurt every night for the past two years. Not a simple hurt of shattered and mending nerve endings. The wound had healed cleanly for all of the agony and horror that he felt. There was a deeper hurt, a hurt so deadly that few men could have survived it.

"What is it? The word, 'war'?" she asked.

"Never mind," he said. "You need rest."

"I rest," she agreed and closed her eyes. She was asleep instantly. He drew the cover over her and dimmed the light before retiring to the battered upholstered chair on the far side of the room. He sat silently, watching her alien breasts rise and fall, round and exciting for all of their strange form.

He must have fallen asleep without realizing it. His dreams were at first formless. He was conscious of his

body drifting in a featureless mist. He was acutely aware of every somasthetic message of his damaged body, aware of all the changes occurring within his viscera, of the sob of air in his lungs, of the heavy pulse of blood in his thighs and . . .

And in his . . .

Which was utterly impossible. He knew it was impossible in a cold dispassionate way. There was no sense of panic, no anguish, no deadening wish for the end of life and the concurrent depression when he realized that he did not even have the courage to bring this to being. He was aware rather of rising emotion, the implacable need building, and then in his mind the sudden overwhelming joyous spasm of relief.

He started from his sleep, anger washing over him. She sat in the dim light, her legs pulled up under her chin, the coverlet falling loosely over her lap. He jumped to his feet and rushed to the bed. "You—you thing!" he demanded. "What right have you . . ."

And then he noticed something odd. At first he thought it was the light. He reached out, turned up the lamp, and peered closely at her face. Yes, there was no doubt about it. Where her skin had previously been very smooth and almost silk-like in texture, it now seemed coarser. There were shadows under her large eyes and the first touch of coarse graining that signaled the beginning of fine wrinkles. Was it possible, he wondered. Had she aged so in a single hour?

He reached out and touched her face, his fingers flowing up her cheek to her eyes. She looked at him with the faintest touch of fear and turned away. He grabbed her chin and with a mixture of brutality and tenderness turned her face back to the light. For an instant a large golden tear lurked in the corner of her eye. Then he leaned forward, motivated by what he knew not, and kissed her on the cheek. He was surprised at his own tenderness. He had not known such an emotion for two

years. All of the tenderness in him had been submerged in bitterness and an inner-directed rage.

"Do you know what it's like?" he asked aloud. "To turn your back forever on knowing any kind of normal love?"

"Like?" she said. "Love?" she said.

Normal love, he thought. Well, one had to stretch the definition. Love with an utterly alien creature who seemed to age with the strength of the passion she gave him. Well, love nevertheless, with the full explosive physical meaning of the term.

He marveled at the thought. He had not expected ever to feel that incredible feeling again. Not that he did not desire it. No, that was the ironic part of it. While they had given him cosmetic repair and were able to replace the chemical losses by suitable injections once a month, the simple ability to participate in the most basic of human functions had been denied him.

Until this moment.

The excitement of the idea, the sheer animal delight of the memory overwhelmed him and, without knowing quite what was happening, he leaned forward and kissed her. Then his arms were encircling her and he was kissing her fully, feeling her respond to his sudden passion, feeling the intensity build within him, until . . .

He fell back, satiated. He looked at her face. Her eyes were closed and faint pain flickered across her face. Her face, he realized, was discernably older. The wrinkles around the eyes were clear now, the texture of the skin noticeably coarser.

"Oh, God!" he said aloud. "What are you?"

She smiled a small girl smile (so out of place in the aging face) and said simply, "I am . . . pleasure?"

After that, she sank back into the bed and closed her eyes while he sat silently, looking at her with a mixture of wonder and fear. Of course, he thought. For what other reason would one expect such a delicate, overtly dependent creature to be on such a ship? There was

precedent enough in his own history. They must be indeed a strange race, those creatures who had built the vaporized starship. For them, sex was not a physical thing, but rather a kind of explosive empathy that had all of the psychic release that his own kind found in more immediate physical contact.

She was pleasure, she said. He smiled ironically. Conceived or perhaps designed for one thing. The one thing he needed himself. Only the psychic discharge that was life and health for him was something quite terrible for her. It aged her and perhaps would in time mean her life. He wondered if this were a normal thing with her or if in some special way his own alienness were responsible.

She was asleep again, he noted. He returned to the chair and after awhile began to doze himself. He was deep in underbrush in a jungle half a world away. His feet sank into the soggy ground that seemed at moments as if it might literally swallow him up. All around there was silence . . . no sounds of birds or animals. Only the deadly silence of an inimicable jungle with things lurking ahead, waiting for him. He felt the oppressive weight of the helmet on his head, the soggy dankness of the fatigues clinging to his body. He moved ahead cautiously, wondering from what direction menace might come. He did not detect the thin wire across his path until the last moment. In a wash of panic, he tried to pull back but he was off balance. The wire tightened, gave an instant, and then became taut again before snapping. In the next instant he heard a 'pop' in front of him. Hardly an explosion but rather a soft-voiced burst of smoke. His frantic eyes dimly perceived the cannister that rose from the bushes almost to waist level before its thin retaining cable halted it, tugged at it and detonated it. A vicious cone of metal sprayed outward, a shredding umbrella of steel pellets that lashed at his legs and clawed at his loins.

He screamed in his dream. He may have screamed aloud. He was not sure because his ears suddenly became deaf to the imagined sound. He was awash again with the remembered sensation, soothing his anguish, and building again until a kind of neural explosion left him limp and quivering and physically drained. Flaccid and content until . . .

He awoke and saw her half out of bed, her face contorted with pain. Only now it was an old face and she quivered with a malaise like some ancient crone seized with ague. *My God*, he thought, *I've done this to her . . .*

And after her there won't be another.

Would there be another? How did they reproduce? Was she even part of that starship-building race, or merely a plaything they built for their own relief? With no obvious sex organs, she seemed a dead end biologically.

He raged at his own selfishness. She was obviously dying and all he could think of was his own personal desires—that he had found some way of satisfying that raging frustration that had trapped him to this moment.

He jumped from the chair and rushed to her side. She looked up at him out of ancient eyes, her face lined and weary. Her breath came in great sobs.

"What can I do?" he pleaded.

"Do?" she said and shook her head. He turned and ran to the sink to draw a glass of water. He turned just as she struggled to her feet.

"Wait!" he yelled, but she stumbled to the door, pushed aside the canvas that covered it and was outside before he could move.

He ran after her, stumbling through the door into the chill morning air. The east was already bright with the promise of a searing sun. She was nowhere in sight. Then he noticed the sand ruffled by her bare feet and he

started after her, following her trail over the rise. She was returning to the site where the ship had crashed.

At the top of the rise, he stopped. Below, her form sprawled on the ground. He raced down toward her. When he was beside her, he stopped in horror.

She was quite dead. Certainly no being could live with such signs of corruption on it. She seemed to be slowly withering in the morning sun, her arms and legs sagging as from an inner decay. Her face was melting away before his eyes while her abdomen began to bulge and swell as from the formation of inner gases.

"Oh, God," he cried and sank down before her. There was no odor, only the signs of advancing dissolution. He watched as the bulging abdomen suddenly collapsed and then split open quite neatly as if from a surgical knife. Inside was darkness and then . . .

Something moving.

He fell back and then sprang to his feet, retching. Even as he watched, the warm thing inside came rigidly erect, its outlines melting and changing as it did so. The faintest suggestion of a face was forming on the distended head.

He turned and stumbled away, horror giving his feet speed. Behind him the changing thing cried plaintively in the morning air.

"Wait for me," it cried. "It will be just as it was before."

He ran into the desert, sobbing, while behind him the worm thing grew and changed and opened sightless eyes.

"Wait for me," it cried pleadingly. "Wait for me . . ."

Rescuing people is what the great hairy smutch does best. But who wants to rescue a smutch?

Not *That* Shaggy . . .

RON GOULART

The great hairy smutch was working a crossword puzzle in the sand. Cope, a lanky redhaired man of thirty-one, could see the large shaggy snub-nosed animal through the partially open flap of the silken beach tent. The puzzle covered about two square yards of pale gold sand and Larz, the great hairy smutch, was filling in the letter boxes with a smooth length of driftwood.

Beneath Cope the princess sighed and asked again, "I said how do you feel?"

A frown showed briefly on Cope's boney freckled face. "About what?"

Princess Dialia pushed him up off her and began grabbing her scattered garments. "I guess it's safe to say you're not ecstatic."

Cope watched the slim redskinned girl. "Sure, I'm ecstatic," he said, turning to watch the smutch out in the intensely yellow afternoon. "Do you hear shouting in the distance, and the rattle of swords and farm implements?"

"No," replied the lovely naked princess. "It's probably just another uprising. The people in my territory are very short tempered for the most part." She pulled on some of her filmy undergarments. "It's a good thing I don't share that trait or I'd have my territorial guards lop off your head and then I'd boot it around the block."

"It is a crowd." Cope was at the tent flap now, watching uphill. "I can't make out their signs from here."

"Hark Hakes and six of my most stalwart territorial guards are stationed around my private beach," the red princess reminded him. "No one can reach us."

"I'm worried about his reaching them." Cope pointed at the great hairy smutch, who was chewing the tip of the drift wood stick and studying his crossword puzzle book. "I don't want him going off and rescuing anybody else."

"You don't seem to enjoy anyone who follows his natural instincts," said Princess Dialia, clomping her crown angrily on her head.

"You're not going to be able to get your dress on over that crown," Cope pointed out, glancing at the slim red girl. "That kind of diaphanous synthetic will get all snagged on the prongs."

Dialia threw the six-pointed crown at him. "You don't even have any pants on."

"Thanks for reminding me." Cope returned to the middle of the tent, bent, and rumaged through the tangle of clothes.

"Watch out, you've got one of your socks all wound around my sceptre."

"That's what you get for bringing it on a beach party." He put on his socks and his all-season shorts.

"Why did I allow myself to fall in love with an outlander?" said Dialia. "A white-toned freckled offplanet outlander." She sighed. "A public relations man from Barnum. Think of all the different kinds of men on this planet of Esmeralda I could have fallen in love with. I could have fallen in love with a turtle man, a lizard man—"

"The scales would give you rub marks all over." Cope gently pulled his discarded trousers out from under one of her pale red feet.

"—a giant six-armed green man, a cat man, a blue man from over in Janota Territory—"

"That's what they're shouting about," said Cope, nod-

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ding his head in the direction of the cliffside beyond their beach tent.

"Who I might sleep with?"

"About Janota Territory." Cope got his trousers on and seamed up tight. "About your efforts to resume friendly political relations between your territory of Xacara and Janota Territory."

"I'm going to make sure Janota is admitted to the League of Territories," said the princess. "I'm going to recognize them again and invite their ambassadors. Immediately after the big badminton tournament tomorrow. In fact, I may make the invitation during the Xacara-Janota tourney, right after I throw out the first shuttlecock."

From the top of the sandy hillside three hundred feet above them came shouts of "Don't seat Janota!" Then what sounded to be another hundred or more citizens of Xacara shouted "Give Janota a seat! Hey, hey!"

Cope stepped out on the warm sand just as a large blue and gold beach umbrella came fluttering down from the cliff above.

The great hairy smutch spotted it as it caught air and began to float down toward them. He left his crossword puzzle, came trotting over to Cope. With his stick Larz wrote in the sand, "Well, jerk?"

Cope shook his head. "You stay right here, Larz."

The smutch was nearly as tall as Cope and covered with medium-long brown hair. He had a snout of a nose and large very bright blue eyes. After waving his drift wood stick at the floating umbrella, he wrote, "You do know blue and gold are the official colors of Barnum, your native planet? Therefore, jerk, that umbrella belongs to—"

Cope stepped on the message, saying, "Yes, the crowd probably has its hands on Talbot Hunneker of the Political Espionage Office on Barnum. That's his problem, coming out here and spying on me."

Larz trotted to a clear stretch of sand and wrote, the stick point digging in deep, "Rescuing people is what I do best, jerk. The great hairy smutch is something akin to the collie dog on your native planet, only smarter. We thrive on getting people out of tough spots."

"That's why the smutch is practically extinct," said Cope. The PEO agent's field glasses came flying over the cliff edge now.

At seven spots in a large half circle around the crimson and gold beach tent stood seven ten foot tall six-armed green men. Each was armed with two swords, two pistols and a spike-ended truncheon. Hark Hakes, the captain of the guard, saluted Cope with his one free hand. "Want us to hike up and stomp a few people? See what the princess says."

"She wants you to remain right here," Cope said to the giant green guardsman.

Larz grunted and wrote in the sand, "You've got no balls."

"You're thinking of the turtle men." Cope put a hand on the smutch's shaggy back. "Go finish your crossword puzzle. It took the guards a half hour to lay it all out for you."

"Suppose they tear Talbot Hunneker to shreds?"

"PEO will send someone new out to gather him up," said Cope. "These protest crowds haven't done much physical violence yet."

"What about that blonde curly haired young woman I rescued from the Trappers Information Society the other day? Those guys were going to deflower her, jerk."

"They won't try that on Talbot Hunneker," said Cope. "And this is a different sort of crowd."

"Seat!" shouted the protesters above. "Unseat!"

"Jerk," repeated Larz in the sand.

Cope said, "Look, Larz. The princess and her royal cabinet hired Barker and Associates of Barnum to send

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someone out here to Esmeralda two months ago to look after you. You're one of the nine great hairy smutches known to be extant in the territories. Since you had a reputation for being talented in several areas and had rescued dozens of people, collie-like, from dangers of one sort and another—"

"Eighty-six," jabbed Larz in the sand. "That's how many I've saved."

"—since you had rescued eighty-six people and were something of an animal hero, Princess Dialia, exhibiting the sagacity which has made her at twenty-six one of the best loved rulers Xacara Territory has ever had, hired us to take over your management and get you some publicity throughout the Barnum System of planets. When I arrived two months ago you had only a small reputation as a royal pet, now, in only a few short weeks, you've become a celebrity on numerous planets. This helps the princess get recognition from other territories and other planets, not to mention funds and concessions. And the fees already are staring to come in from the various merchandising deals I've set up."

"Stuffed toys," wrote Larz in the sand. "Is that your idea of dignity, jerk? I'm not all cheap tricks and rescues, you know. I can play the piano, do complicated math problems, and I'm good at most sports. Especially badminton."

Cope nodded. "Which is why I want you to take it easy. You are one of the star players in tomorrow's badminton tournament. See, Xacara and Janota are about to enter a whole new era of political rapport. It's important that you, a celebrity, appear at the matches. In good shape."

"I can rescue people and still play badminton."

Cope said, "The mounted guards are arriving."

Up above fifty grout-mounted six-armed green men were riding into the crowd, swinging swords. "All this

chit chat with you, jerk, and the fun's over up there," wrote the smutch. He turned his shaggy back on Cope and stalked away to his crossword puzzle.

Princess Dialia looked out of the silken tent. "Before I put all my clothes back on, are you in the mood for anything else?"

Cope was frowning up at the scattering riot. "In a minute," he told the lovely red princess.

Inquisitive little furry animals were scuttling over the floor of Cope's bedchamber. He muttered, "Scat, scat," as he made his way across the moonlit room.

Near the high arched window of his tower room sat a small tri-op communication set. It was giving off a soft bonging.

Cope stood on the flowery X painted on the stone floor and flipped on the answering unit. A little furry smollet slithered over his bare foot. "Hello. This is Cope," he said into the speaking horn.

"All I'm getting down her on Barnum is your right knee and something I presume is your left buttock," said the gnarled man who materialized on the small reception pedestal. He was bent and pale skinned, five inches tall on the tri-op projection stage.

"What do you expect at this hour of the night?" Cope rubbed his eyes and looked down at the little image of Barker, his boss in the public relations agency.

"Have you got that broad with you?" asked the gnarled PR man.

"She sleeps in the royal chamber."

"You younger guys," said Barker. "I never made it a practice to screw clients in my youth. Public relations is, after all, an art. For art you need detachment."

"For art you need detachment," repeated three scurrying smollets.

"Hold on a minute." Cope backed away from the tri-op communication unit. The smollets were shaped some-

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thing like stylized mice, plump and round-eyed. They looked to be originating in one of his high wardrobe closets. Cope strode to the tapestry draped covering of the closet and pulled it aside.

A giant six-armed green in a blonde wig was crouched in the deep closet, a wire-sided suitcase on his lap. "We never sleep," he said, chuckling apologetically.

"Jesus, Bo," said Cope. "I thought you and the security guard people cleared me weeks ago."

Bo Bleek, the head of the princess' security guard, smoothed his black silken dress down with three of his hands. "The impending badminton tourney, Cope. It's got everyone on edge. We hear rumors that anti-Janota forces may make trouble. I needn't tell you that there are forces abroad here in Xacara who would prefer we keep our distance from Janota. In fact, I'm not certain your own Barnum Political Espionage Office is completely in favor of the coming rapprochement." He fingered the lace at his collar. "So, what with one thing and another, we're keeping on our toes."

"Rapprochement," said a little smollet, leaping back into the suitcase by way of a swing door.

"Why all these things?"

"Well," replied Bleek, "ours is a backward planet in many ways, Cope. We can't afford all the latest gimmicks and surveillance hardware. Ideally these little rascals should be perfect for intelligence work. They're natural born mimics, repeat anything they hear."

"They tend to repeat it immediately after they hear it."

"Unfortunately, yes," agreed Bleek. "That's one of the snags I've noticed. Well, this is really just a field test." He hitched up the large false bosom under his black silk dress.

"Another thing, Bo," said Cope. "Your disguise isn't too good. There aren't any maids your size around the palace."

"Oh, this outfit has nothing to do with my professional

work," explained Bleek. "I hate to admit it, but I suffer from a few little quirks. This is a backward planet and all the latest therapies you enjoy on—"

"Okay," cut in Cope. "Why don't you go over to the next suite and look after Larz? He's the one who needs extra scrutiny."

"I've got a man in there already," said Bleek. "But I guess one more won't hurt. Twelve hands are better than six, as we say." He snapped some of his green fingers and the two dozen little smollets he'd loosed in Cope's chambers came scurrying back to him. As they hopped into the suitcase he added, "Frankly I'll sigh with relief when the badminton business is over."

When Cope went back to the tri-op unit Barker asked, "Who's that enormous ugly broad in your closet?"

"He's the head of the palace security guard."

"No wonder things are so fouled up out there on Esmeralda." Barker's gnarled face wrinkled even more.

"Everybody's either horny or queer."

"So?"

"I've sold the Barnum News Synd on the idea of a documentary on the badminton thing," said Cope's boss. "A crew should arrive there early tomorrow. I had some help from certain people in the Barnum government. There's something of a schism here on Barnum, half the political nitwits want Xacara to recognize Janota again and half don't."

"Things are similar here."

"There have even been a few public incidents."

"This afternoon they threw Talbot Hunneker's umbrella over a cliff," said Cope. "And there are several groups around, besides the pro and anti-Janota people, interested in Larz. There's the Trappers Information Society. They want to make a coat out of him. There's Animal Fandom. They want the great hairy smutch listed as a vanishing breed and they keep asking the princess to loan Larz to them so they can mate him with

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the female smutch they keep in their headquarters on the outskirts of town. I'm also starting to get requests from civic groups for him to lecture."

"I envy you out there, Cope. All that excitement," said Barker. "The Barnum News Synd people will be looking for you at the tournament tomorrow. You and that smutch get there early."

"I take it he's the big selling point."

"Right. No smutch, no deal," said Barker. "Though I don't anticipate any—what's that noise?"

"The head of the palace security guard has just come galloping in here."

"The guard I left with Larz is unconscious out on the street below the palace," said Bleek. "The smutch is gone."

Cope sucked in his cheek, then said to his boss, "Call me back tomorrow."

The broad-shouldered Political Espionage Office agent kept looking from Cope to the sprawled six-armed security guard. "Is it really so important, Cope?" asked Talbot Hunneker.

"Where am I?" moaned the giant green man.

Squatting on the cobblestones beside him, Cope said, "Still in front of the palace."

Two of the stunned green man's arms were twisted under him and the two others touched the edge of the wide flower beds which bordered all of the high many-towered pink stone palace. "I tripped," said the guard.

"Yeah," said Cope. "Someone stretched a thong across the stairway leading down to the street here. Where's Larz?"

The giant security guard's leather clothes creaked as he sat up. He held his head with four hands and made a groaning sound. "Where's Bo Bleek? I ought to report to him first."

"He decided he'd better change clothes before coming

outside," said Cope, who was wearing a woolly robe over his night tunic. "So you can tell me."

"Is it really so important?" repeated Hunneker. "I'm sure Larz is frolicking and will be back by sun up. You keep too tight a rein on him, Cope. Now I grew up on a grout ranch on Murdstone and what we did—"

"I have to get that shaggy bastard to the tournament at the Great Colosseum tomorrow early, Hunneker."

The large secret agent shook his head. "There's much too much emphasis on the physical around these parts. Folks should stop and ask themselves, 'What of the life of the mind and its—'"

"Where is Larz?" Cope asked the guard.

The guard turned from side to side. "I was hoping the little blonde curly-haired girl was still around and about."

"Jesus, another blonde curly-haired girl," said Cope. "Did he go off to rescue her?"

"Not her, her grandmother," explained the green man. "Larz was up there in his suite. You can see where the window shutters are open and there are some smudges of sand on the wall."

"Larz climbed down the side of the palace?"

"Yes," replied the guard. "He was amusing himself as quiet as you please working at one of them crossword puzzles laid out in the big sandbox in his bedroom and I was hunched in a closet all snug with my suitcase of experimental smollets tucked up under my—"

"Where was this little blonde curly-haired girl?"

"Down here in the street, right beside this flower patch, crying and sobbing to the effect that her poor old grandmother was in trouble, dire trouble I believe she called it, and would no one help her. When Larz heard her sobs wafting up he flung aside his puzzle book and, still clutching the pool cue he was using to mark in the sand with, he hightailed it out the window. Oh, and he wrote something in the sandbox."

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“What?”

“The jerk can’t stop me this time.”

Cope pressed his fingertips against his freckled cheek, making white spots on the bone ridge. “You decided to follow by way of the stairs, tripped and were stunned.”

“We have a certain dignity to maintain in the guards. I couldn’t come cascading down the side of the palace, especially at this late hour.”

Bleek appeared at the foot of the stairway that ran down the palace side, dressed in a conservative leather suit. As he passed Cope he stooped and whispered, “I dressed in an awful rush. How do I look?”

“Fine, except you’re still wearing the blonde wig.”

“Oops. Well, I’ll have to bluff through. Good evening, Mr. Hunneker. Glad to see you taking an interest.”

The PEO agent said, “Why don’t we all go to bed? Basically that’s what I came out here to say.”

Bleek stooped again and pulled his associate up to his feet. “Give me the details.”

Cope wandered a short distance from the trio, studying the ground. He noticed a footprint, possibly that of a blonde curly-haired little girl, in the dust near the flower beds. A few yards farther along the roadway muddy prints showed on lemon yellow stones. Cope followed these around a corner of the palace wall and discovered signs of a struggle amidst a scattering of flowered ferns. It looked as though two men had been hiding in among the ferns and had jumped out when Larz passed with the little girl. They’d struggled with the great hairy smutch, on the road and through the flower beds.

Cope knelt and studied the soft ground of the royal flower beds. Something had been written in the dirt, quickly and shakily with the point of a pool cue. He read the message aloud. “91 across.”

Rising, Cope scratched his already ruffled red hair.

Then he jogged off, re-entering the palace by another stairway.

The three trappers jumped Cope in the dusty dawn alley. They wore fur coats and large lapel buttons reading: "Hi! I'm Vic Bonkossky of the Trappers Information Society."

Cope kicked one furcoated man in the stomach, slammed an elbow into the jaw of another. "You can't all be Vic Bonkossky."

The third trapper was attempting a strangle hold on him. "Our convention committee made a slight error and we ended up with a hundred Bonkossky buttons too many. We don't like to waste anything, Mr. Animal Lover."

The man Cope had kicked in the stomach fell down. The other trapper, the one who wasn't trying to strangle Cope, swung a picket sign up off the alleyway. "We don't like animal lovers, Mr. Animal Lover."

"This has all been a misunderstanding." Cope broke the attempted strangle hold and flipped that trapper forward over his head and onto the other fallen man. "You probably think because I'm coming here to the Animal Fandom headquarters that I'm actually a member."

"Aren't you?" asked the only standing picket.

"No, I'm with the Barnum News Synd. I'm here to get both sides in this frumus."

The trapper lowered his sign, which read: *Smutches Are For Coats!* "I'm terribly sorry," he said. "You see, we got the worst shift for picketing. There isn't much action in this part of town from midnight until dawn and I guess we tend to overreact when someone does come along. Now as to our stand on why the great hairy smutch shouldn't be on the restricted list—"

Cope said, "Hold it. The way this is logged in my news book, I have to get the Animal Fandom side of the debate before I hear from you. That makes for less edit-

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ing afterwards. You revive your friends and I'll talk to the three of you when I emerge."

"You'll get back before the cock crows? We go off duty then."

"I'll make a point." Cope stepped around the two unconscious furcoated trappers and climbed the wooden steps to the door of the two story building that housed Animal Fandom. He knocked with the grout-shaped knocker on the second door from the left and in a moment a camera light glowed on above the doorway.

"Ah, it's the one with the freckles," said a sleepy woman's voice from out of the voice box beneath the camera.

"Good morning, Lady Osmeroid," said Cope, grinning. "I want to talk with you."

"Have you tired of that scrawny princess?"

"Not exactly." Folded in the back pocket of his trousers was the crossword puzzle book he'd located in Larz' suite at the palace.

"Hang on, I have to throw a couple of switches. Let's see now. There, and there."

Cope turned the dog's head door knob and stepped into a long corridor. Various animals were roaming the thick-rugged floor. At the hallway's end stood a plump blonde woman of thirty-five in a one-piece hiking suit. "Where is he?" Cope asked her.

"Who?" The chairman of Animal Fandom came closer. She brushed by a possum who was feigning sleep in her path.

Cope pulled out the puzzle book Larz had been working on before he'd been lured away, turned to the page the smutch had been on. "91 across: an animal sanctuary, six letters."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Trappers Information Society wants to make coats out of the remaining smutches," said Cope. "You in Animal Fandom want them to breed. You've been peti-

tioning Princess Dialia to loan you Larz to mate with Animal Fandom's own female smutch."

"It's better for him than working crossword puzzles," said the plump Lady Osmeroid. "We haven't kidnapped Larz, if that's what you're implying."

"According to the message he left he was expecting to be brought to an animal sanctuary," said Cope tapping the puzzle book. "Maybe to save somebody's grandmother."

Lady Osmeroid inhaled sharply. "Grandmother? I wonder if that can be what the lizard man in the shawl and wig was doing in the insurance company offices upstairs."

"Lizard man?"

"He was trying desperately, now, I think of it, to look like somebody's grandmother," said Lady Osmeroid. "One of our manx cats got lost up on the second floor. I heard the mewing and went up some hours ago to fetch him. I saw this lizard man lurking about. At the time I didn't think too much of it, since this particular company insures all sorts."

"They must have told him they had somebody for him to rescue here, but he got suspicious too soon and they knocked him out somehow," said Cope. "He only had time to leave a quick clue before they dragged him off."

Lady Osmeroid said, "Whoever abducted your poor beast might also have wanted to throw suspicion on us."

"Show me the office the lizard granny was in."

Lady Osmeroid took Cope up to the second floor in the rise shaft. "You know, a big van was parked out in back of here about a half hour ago. Its roaring off into the night awoke me. Could they have taken poor Larz away in that?"

In one of the insurance cubicles there was some evidence of a struggle, chairs and filing cabinets turned over. "They must have held him here for awhile," said

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Cope. "This was a rendezvous point, where Larz was picked up to be transported elsewhere."

"Even the ashtray urn has spilled," said Lady Osmeroid. "Cereal-base cigar butts all over, and gritty sand."

Cope studied the sprawl of sand. Written in it with a shaggy finger was *27 down*.

Cope pushed aside half-dressed sausage vendors and shot the locks off the huge wooden door with his blaster pistol. He hit the thick door with his shoulder and it swung inward. He dived, low and sideways, into the cavernous stone room beyond. "Hands up," he told the two surprised giant six-armed green men. "All of them."

In a dusty corner of the Great Colosseum basement Larz was sitting on a low barrel; wound round his shaggy body were great lengths of thong. Twisting, the smutch wrote in the thick dust of the floor with his toe. "What took you so long, jerk? It's almost noon."

"27 down: a well-known basement," said Cope. "I spent an hour looking for you in the catacombs under the Temple of St. Norbert the Divine and another hour and a half in the nostalgia vaults of the Xacara Antiquary Society. Then I figured maybe they had you right here under the badminton courts."

"Jerk," Larz wrote again.

Cope eased over to Larz and cut at his bonds with a short sword. "Hey, it's Hark Hakes," he said, getting a better look at the two kidnappers. Of the princess' guard."

"We got to put love of territory over love of a specific princess, do you see?" said the enormous green man. "Let me explain how it is I feel. Picture me a little nipper growing to manhood in the wild untamed tundra beyond . . ."

Larz, free, poked Cope with one shaggy paw and then, dipping his finger in dust, wrote on the stone wall.

"Don't let them stall you, jerk. They've planted a bomb in the shuttlecock. The substitute player in the first match is one of their boys. The bomb is set to go off at fourteen minutes past noon."

"You mean the shuttledock Princess Dialia is going to throw out to signal the start of the badminton tournament?"

"That shuttlecock, yes."

Cope handed Larz a blaster lifted from Hark Hakes' leather holster. "Watch them. Don't go off to rescue any little blonde curly-haired girls." He turned on one foot and ran from the place.

A turtle man sausage vendor snapped an angry remark as Cope ran through the vendors' dressing room and up the long arched stone ramp leading to the outdoor playing courts. It was eleven minutes after twelve.

The day was clear blue and the scarlet flag of Xacara fluttered alongside the green banner of Janota all around the vast stone amphitheater. In the very center of the great green sward field a badminton net was set up. It, too, was fluttering in the gentle wind.

"The substitute match is about to commence, ladies and gentlemen," announced festooned loudspeakers circling the area. "Representing Xacara is Narf Naggin, a last minute substitute for everybody's favorite great hairy smutch Larz, and himself no mean contender on the courts of competitive badminton."

Far across the field Princess Dialia was sitting in the royal box. Her slim red arm was raised high and it held a white feathered badminton shuttlecock. Cope turned away from her direction and rushed up another ramp.

"Representing our friendly rivals across the border is Bing Dahl, the pride of Janota. Now the two players are leaving the court area and will approach the royal box. At precisely 12:15 our beloved princess will throw out the royal shuttlecock and the round of competition will . . ."

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In the announcement pavilion Cope leaped over the broadcasters' table and grabbed the mike. "Dialia, throw that damn shuttlecock away now. It's a bomb."

He looked down at the field and the royal box.

The slim red girl hesitated and pointed at her hand.

"Yes, throw it away quick."

She hesitated a second longer and then threw the feathered badminton bird toward a clear part of the field.

Narf Naggin, the six-armed ringer, had been very slow in approaching the princess. Now he turned and ran back toward the center of the field.

The shuttlecock hit the turf, lay for an instant, then exploded. Dirt and clods of sward erupted, flashes of scarlet and orange.

"After the field is swept," Cope said into the public address system mike, "you're favorite and mine, Larz the great hairy smutch, will make his tardy but much anticipated appearance on the field of play and the originally scheduled badminton match will get under way."

The earthy-red lizard man announcer smiled at Cope. "You did that announcing chore very well, friend. Have you ever thought of working with the public professionally?"

"No, never," said Cope, and left to join the princess.

Making it—today and forevermore. That's what it's all about, isn't it?

The Ballad of Slick Sid

BARRY N. MALZBERG

This is a song. Everyone has their own way of doing things. A song is mine.

Sid: I am Slick Sid. You asked me to tell you how my life looked and what I think of the situation and when you talk situation you really mean the future. Even a machine knows that. All life is a question of future make-it: some make it fast like Sid over here, others make it slow like the government man but everybody living makes it one way or the other.

The only checkout is the F.T. But not for Sid, not yet.

SHERRY ON THE BACK SEAT: LOVE

The Mars shot lays down the pipe, two, *three* and I go *up*, hovering like a rocket wasted. Sherry backs me off, her little hands beating at my chest. "No," she says, and it is all I can do not to swat the little bitch in the face but I am cool. Sid is cool, he knows all the moves; I say, "Now, Sherry. We are celebrating the landing on Mars. We have conquered Mars and we must be happy."

"I didn't think you believed in stuff like that," she says . . . and in the back seat, the rotting upholstery crumbling around us, the dead wires of the turbo-hydradramatic drive pushing from the rusting floorboards, I must explain to her just as I explain to you that some make it to the future fast and some make it slow but all alive are making it, and that to stop the future is like death . . .

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Or worse.

"I don't like sex," little Sherry says and bounces. "Not at times like this." But Sid is insistent and I talk to her quietly of passion and need until finally . . .

As I knew she would.

But it is no good at all as I am moaning and crying into her shoulder while somewhere over us the hatchway of the rocket opens on Mars and men scuttle on that planet like roaches.

Sherry turns on the radio for bulletins which is how we hear this, but I do not care about Mars—nor, for the moment, even about Sherry. I am concerned with my own uncool but urgent need as I plunge into the future.

MAKING IT IN THE BACK ROOM DREAMING LIKE A DOVE

At an easy session, nothing special, just spiralling, Jug says that he is going to take the final trip and shoot death. He is very serious: sweat and seriousness come off Jug's face like the idiocy which haunts Sherry's. "I will meet the master," he says and takes it on, really deadly: four cc's of the stuff into the vial and only then do we begin to protest; but mildly because no one in the serenity group has yet seen a final trip before them. "You're too young, Jug," the leader says and points out that the final trip must come through enlightenment, but never from spite which is the only emotion which Jug, that dullard, understands. "Crap," he answers and without arguing further takes in the needle, drives it through and faints over his arm as if it were a plank of wood. *Cool!* Jug says, his features receding and dies in front of us.

We conclude in our discussion that this is a brave and even a remarkable thing; we also come to the assessment that the act must be inextricably bound to the actor and hence nothing which Jug does can suggest the moment of ultimate serenity. This is how the leader puts it. "Inextricably bound to the actor". So we go on our way, feel-

ing bad about Jug but maybe a little envious, too, and the session ends with helpers coming in for the corpse. But that night and for many nights thereafter I find myself dreaming of the final trip and waking up to stare at the ceiling, quivering with my need and fear.

"I don't want to die," I say to the ceiling. "Not yet." But all along I know that this is not quite the point and from looking at the other members of the group I sense that they are going through the same thing. But there is no way to discuss it and no one else f.t.'s either, so after a while we forget about it . . .

As the future overtakes us.

TALKING TO THE ELDERS, KEEPING MY COOL

On the day the first three men are lost on Mars my old man calls me in for a talk and asks me what I am going to do with my life. I explain that I am now doing it and he says that all is make-it, but some bewilderment in his eyes suggests that he does not understand what I am truly saying. So for a little while I lay the truth on him, just enough to keep him active and interested. "Cats on Mars are going to die all over the place," I tell him among other things, and at last he leaves.

"I respect you Sid," he says at the door, but he is by then out of my life. So I do not have to listen to any more of this garbage, being locked into my continuing apperception which, as the serenity group teaches, enables me to truly meld with the future.

HITTING FOR THE BIG RIDE: I AIN'T NO FOOL

Sherry tells me that we must reach some kind of adjustment in our relationship, that she can no longer continue in this way. I have been getting her for three days now and must move to a different level. Other stuff. "Are you ready to make a commitment, Slick Sid?" she says

The Ballad of Slick Sid

(I make her call me that) and she does things to me with her mouth. But I am no longer interested. I have already had my fill and then too I have a slight overload of Jug's stuff trickling in me which has anesthetized me at the fringes. He willed it to me. "We've got to feel *something*," she says. "You don't feel, Slick Sid."

"Heavy," I say and take her out then in the Buick eleven miles out on the flats, doing one hundred ten on the turns: then put it flat into a guardrail at the peak. It is fifty-fifty that the restraints open after twelve rusting years but the fact that I am singing this out to you is proof that they did. Sherry screams when she gets out of the wrecked Bolt but when I point out that I am only trying to give her some of the feeling she asked for she becomes quiet and I realize that things are ended. Back through the flats and into the project before search time and I leave her there to consider her destiny as I lock down the Bolt and race the dose toward sleep.

Sleep is the fast way into the future.

AIN'T GONNA MAKE IT TILL SEVENTY-THREE

In the night I have an astronautic experience, a space-dream. I feel that I am on Mars, part of the landing crew in fact, sifting my way through artifacts and ruins in a meditative way while the sands drill their way into my helmet, closing off respiration. Before I realize what has happened I am choking, and before I can save myself I am dead; in that death within the dream I meet a Martian.

He is the last Martian in fact, a tall, gangly creature with crushed legs and a stomach pod. "Exactly what do you think you're doing on my planet?" he asks and I answer that I am doing what men always do; that is, I am exploring. "Exploring for what?" the Martian says and I shrug and say that I hardly know.

"I'm kind of a drug expert," I say. I'm researching the

ancient Martian hallucinatives." The Martian nods solemnly and says that he could have expected this; hallucinatives killed his own race.

"At a certain point of technology," he says, "life becomes unendurable for many; drugs overtake the culture. We survived but one hundred Earth-years past the introduction of drugs." I ask him how he can say that drugs destroyed his culture if he himself concedes that after a certain point such are inevitable.

The Martian has no answer to this; his limbs instead begin to sway and pulse, and grunting threateningly he hurls himself upon me . . .

But Slick Sid has too many moves for any damaged Last Martian; I sidestep and kick him squarely in the center of his pod. He cries and disintegrates, the petals of his being falling on me like ash. I rise from this death, I rise from the dream, and find myself lying in bed with a simple overload, no part of the future.

HOPE I DON'T MAKE IT TILL FIFTY-THREE

On the day that the sixth and seventh explorers on the planet Mars are sucked into the sands never to be heard of again I am visited after-hours by a slender cat who says he is from the government and wants to talk about Jug. There is some indication, the government says, that the death was foul-play and this his final trip was not deliberate.

This government man does not seem to be entirely comfortable with Sid. I attempt to put him at ease by demonstrating certain moves and turns, dimly remembered from Jug, at which I am quite capable. "Slick Sid," he says, when I insist that he call me by that name, "We were told to see Slick Sid, that you know something about the subject issue." This is the way that many of them still talk.

"Slick Sid's the tag," I say, "but I'm going to gag," and so I do this: I say absolutely nothing while the slender

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cat raps on for ten or fifteen minutes in increasing disgust.

"We are going to get *into* these serenity groups," he says, finally. "We are going to *explode* this situation. It is only a matter of time before we put you kids under very strict controls. You have gone too far—*there is no trip in death.*"

"Says you," says Sid, raising a finger. "You are in death."

"You are eighteen years old," the government man says, looking at some papers, refusing to lift his head which is the way that they show you they are angry. "You know *absolutely nothing*. None of you know anything except how to destroy and take on names for yourself, but I am here to tell you that you are *completely misguided* and we are going to *get after you people* before 1998."

And I say to him, Slick Sid says to him with a giggle, finally opening up to this cat because he is the government and after all what man, even at the age of eighteen, does not like to meet his government. "Man, you do not understand anything. Man, you so far out of this that you are not even going in. Get this now, cat: *we are the government*. We are out on the main strip and you cats just the sideshow. We are your future."

WHY EVEN BOTHER WITH FORTY-TWO

In the machines they tell us about the Kenny cats and how they were always getting assassinated and then pull a trick question on us, a real fakeout: *which Kenny was forty-two when assassinated and tragically cut short?* I take the stylus to the special box where you can print answers if you want and write: "Forty-two, that cat was ancient! do you understand? No one gets cut short at forty-two, particularly a Kenny cat who always got mixed up with the wrong people anyway." With a smile I put the answer through, thinking that it is a joke on the

machine because the programming will not know to make of this one at all.

But it is serious, too. It is as serious as Slick Sid can be, because if you were a Kenny cat and took all of that stuff seriously as we are told the Kenny cats did, how could you make it to forty-two and not be *grateful* to have an end to all that crap? To say nothing of forty-six or whatever the older was—forty-six and thunder in the head. I would be better off *dead* than believing any of that stuff; the Kenny cats should have killed themselves for shame is what they should. Slick Sid knows better than any Kenny cat. The time is now: it is always the time right this minute and the only tragic thing about the Kenny cats is that we got to hear about them when instead we ought to be learning more and more about the future.

IF THE FINAL TRIP CAN BE FOR YOU

The night the ninth and tenth Martian explorers wander off and are never seen again, therefore bringing the conquest of Mars to a halt, I dream again, and in this dream I see Jug. There is no overload this time; I have gone to the sack with wet head and clear spirits and all that I seek is the darkness. Nevertheless, there is Jug, looking about the same as he did before he started on out but just a shade more rugged because death is not so good for the complexion.

"Hello you old Slick Sid," he says and gives me the signs, but it is a weary, washed-out Jug who appears before me; some element of vitality is gone forever and he does not give the signs with the old brass, sliding instead to the floor and leaning an elbow on knee, chin on hand, to talk. "It is not so good," he says, "this Final Trip. It is not what you think to be Slick Sid. But it is full of thoughts and colors. I thought that all of it would stop but this is not the case; instead it seems to go on and on and on maybe forever."

The Ballad of Slick Sid

"Who asked you?" I say. "Who wants your opinions? Get out of herel" but Jug gives me only the sweetest and saddest of grins and says, "I can't change the rules, Slick Sid. You called me down from your own desires and now you must listen to me. This Final Trip is not what serenity said it would be: it is something else, so you'd better forget it."

"Who said I was thinking of it?" I say but Jug only gives me this smile again and then stands, uncoiling himself in parts. He becomes translucent. "I just thought you would like to know," he says. "That's all I wanted to tell you," he whispers, and he is gone.

I wake from this dream cursing and shouting, wishing that I could get my hands on Jug to squeeze the life out, but I remember that he is dead and am ashamed of himself. I will *not* think of the F.T.

The F.T. can wait: it will come when I say it will and when it is done it will always be done. Dead once is dead forever, but for now I pick and choose among all the fruits of possibility from the magnificent flourishing tree of the future.

SLICK SID IS GOING ALL THE WAY

Sherry meets me in the elevator after group and says that she cannot forget me. "It can't end this way," she says. "I'm ready for a relationship, and *you* owe me something. You can't turn it off." She is momentarily at least, desirable: soft, open and accessible; and so I say, "Relationship? I'll show you a relationship."

I slip her inside to my cubicle. It would be a rape if she were not cooperating but cooperative she is; I rise above her in the last moments, thinking that I could kill her for kicks; I reach my fingers down behind her eyes to rip her face like a mask.

But just as I am literally about to do it, the juices fail and I am on the comedown; I fall against her sobbing.

I realize that what I thought was murder was only climax and I am ashamed, because this means that I am not yet ready for murder.

After this she talks and talks: wants to establish new ground-rules, even offers to jag down with me, but I do not listen; I shut her off with the curtains in my head until finally she leaves the room crying, saying she will get back at me for all of this.

I see our mark on the sheets: it has the aspect of a face: it is the face of Jug as he appeared in the dream, mocking deep from the F.T. I rip the sheets off the bed and try to wash him away with lye, but he will not vanish. The sheet disintegrates and finally I am left holding Jug's little face in my hands, his eyes winking at me and only then, deep from that nest, does he give me the Word.

It is the Future.

SLICK SID GOT NOTHING MORE TO SAY

At the hour when all contact is lost with the men on Mars and the telescopes pinned to that planet show small dots which suggest flame, at that very hour, Slick Sid finishes off these notes and prepares to take his next step. Slick Sid is prepared: he has waited for this so long. Now he knows exactly what to do.

He sings out his song. He promised to give a picture for you of how he felt and what he did and even a machine should find it helpful. I will drop it in your receiver-slot as you requested, the last thing.

Then I will end the future.

*The spice of magic can still add excitement, even to the
dullest of worlds . . .*

Ding Dong, the Witch Is Well . . .

TOM PICKENS

Moscato turned the corner onto Fifth Avenue, glanced up, and took one giant step backwards, very smartly. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, just to make sure. There was no doubt about it. It was there all right: the giant gorilla standing on top of the Empire State building, clutching a screaming girl, and swatting away at a hornet nest of bi-planes buzzing around his head.

"It can't be," said Moscato, "Unless . . ."

He looked again.

"It is!" he shouted. "By the cracked chimes of St. Toads, it is! It's started up again!"

All around him children were dancing.

"After all these years, it's starting up again. . . ."

The children were jumping up and down and pointing gleefully to the struggle raging above the 103rd floor.

"I've got them!" said Moscato. "I've finally picked up their trail again."

Moscato sniffed at the air.

"The source can't be far away. It's got to be here in the city!"

Damaris was speaking on the phone with her uncle. Her uncle was very angry with her.

"I know, uncle. I know people are upset. I did it for the children. They did so enjoy the movie. Of course they can see it. We've got a beautiful view right out the window."

Even as she spoke, Damaris was dancing barefoot, tracing light, dovelike pathways across the maze pattern on her livingroom rug.

"Well now uncle, don't yell at me like that. You *did* leave me as the baby sitter. And you *did* tell me to entertain them!"

"Does anybody know what's causing that racket out in the street?" shrieked the voice of Miss Thelma over the mailroom intercom of the J. Storm Poplar Corporation.

Every boy in the room had come leaping to his feet at the sound. The intercom could not be turned off at the mailroom outlet. It did not so much announce things as burst like a firecracker, rattling the molars of everybody within range. It was known as the bitchy box.

"No, Miss Thelma," said Colby, the mailboy oldest in line of service. "Nobody knows what's happening out there. We don't go out for lunch. Mr. Poplar says we have to eat lunch in the company cafeteria."

"Well, everybody else is in conference! See if you can find out what's making that racket out there! It's interfering with business! Really, I don't know what this place is coming to!"

Miss Thelma was executive secretary to J. Storm Poplar himself; she was afflicted with her office.

"And remember," she continued. "You've got to water Mr. Poplar's plant! Really, I don't know what this place is coming to!"

Down at the Battery, a giant twenty league squid was having a running battle with fifteen tugboats and fireboats simultaneously. The fireboats were trying to hose the squid back out of the harbor to the Nether Depths From Which It Had So Mysteriously Arisen. A giant moth with the wingspread of a B-52 was swooping in at the Statue of Liberty, its mothian features stamped in a mask of unrequited lust.

Ding Dong, the Witch Is Well . . .

Hordes of children were standing along the shore, watching the separate battles in the harbor, shrieking with piercing glee. Tides of grownups sloshed back and forth through the streets, wringing their hands.

"Brilliant . . . brilliant!" said Moscato, who had sped from the debacle uptown to witness this latest debacle downtown. "The best I've seen so far. The best I've ever seen! Can it be just an illusion? Or is there some seed of reality? And it's so powerful! The source must be very close by!"

"I know, uncle, I know. But the children saw all *those* movies, too."

Her bare feet still flew lightly over the patterns on the rug.

"Look," she said, "if you want Winnie to baby-sit, get Winnie and let her baby-sit *her* way. If you want me to baby-sit, then I baby-sit *my* way."

Miss Thelma did her thing.

"Mr. Poplar's plant must be watered right away, *right away!*" she shrieked over the intercom, her voice amplified raucously by the acoustics of the bitchy box.

In the quivering silence that followed, Colby said, "Your face, Miss Thelma, should be watered, right away, right away!"

"Yeah, but suppose it grows," said a junior mailboy.

Colby headed for Miss Thelma's office. It was a ritual enacted each afternoon with the mathematical certitude of star movements. Thelma would drop one of her Jovian bolts into the mailroom and then one of the mailboys would proceed as respectfully as an incense burner in a Christmas pageant to Mr. Poplar's inner sanctum, secure the plant (a particularly repellent and undernourished six foot specimen curled serpentwise about a plaster log, both of them rising together from a figured pot) and carry it to the floor cleaner's sink at the opposite end of

the corridor, where he would water it under the faucets in the sink.

"Be carefull" said Miss Thelma to Colby when he loomed up on her horizons.

"Be careful," said Miss Thelma, as Colby hoisted the plant into the air and carried it, pot and all, back down the corridor, the plant swaying to and fro like a reversed pendulum.

"Be careful, I say!" said the voice of Miss Thelma echoing down the corridor after him as he went into the floor cleaner's room and closed the door after him.

Colby set the plant in the sink, carefully.

He unzipped himself, carefully.

He urinated on the plant ferociously until all its leaves shimmered and shook in the deluge.

Colby carried the plant, dripping, back to Mr. Poplar's inner sanctum.

"Were you careful?" demanded Miss Thelma.

"Very careful," said Colby.

"I really don't know what this place is coming to."

On his way back uptown to his parking garage, Moscato caught a double decker bus on Fifth Avenue. No double decker bus had run on Fifth Avenue in years. Moscato climbed slowly up to the top deck and sat down carefully, running his hand over the seat and the wall and the glass window with its regal, surmounting view of the avenue below.

"Lovely, oh lovely," said Moscato. "Illusion transformed into concrete solidity. I haven't seen this for centuries! Toadie, Toadie, if you were only alive to see this happening again. We could hunt them together."

Damaris stormed out of the elevator in a funk. The scene with her uncle, who had finally arrived in person, had been a big, fat one.

"With all the talent you've got you just play stupid

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kid's games," he screamed. "That talent's a treasure, a *treasure*, you understand? You guard it with your life! You don't show it to anybody! You never NEVER play games! You don't turn rubies and emeralds into glass trinkets and beads!"

"Ho boy, just see if I ever baby-sit again," said Damaris, as she huffed out into the streets.

"Something's happened to Mr. Poplar's plant!" shrieked Miss Thelma over the intercom. A chunk of glass fell out of the mailroom window.

Colby marched down the corridor to Mr. Poplar's office.

"What happened to Mr. Poplar's plant?" asked Colby who was genuinely curious.

"Just look at it!" said Miss Thelma.

Colby looked at it. Three feet taller. All-a-blossom with foot-wide blooms. Pulsing about the leaf tips with a vague luminosity that brightened up all the dark corners in the room.

"It's . . . it's degenerate!" said Miss Thelma. "Get rid of it!"

"Get rid of it?" squeaked Colby.

"Of course get rid of it! We can't have monstrosities like that around the office! Really, I don't know what this place is coming to."

"Now what do I do?" asked Colby, alone in the corridor with the vulgarity.

He wrestled the plant towards the men's room, planning to dismember it and flush it piecemeal.

Unfortunately for his plans, Mr. Poplar had held an executive conference that morning, and the executive conferees were now occupying all the stalls in the men's room and queuing up in long lines outside them, waiting for a chance to toss their cookies. They were those sort of executive conferences. It was that sort of a company.

"Great," said Colby.

He pruned off the topmost reaches of the plant (it seemed to be growing) and dropped the pruning experimentally down the Handy Dandy incinerator disposal shaft. He waited a few seconds.

The building vibrated gently. There was the sound of a lusty explosion.

"That's not the answer to my problem," said Colby.

He dragged the plant into the self service elevator. He punched the button for the main floor and also the button for the 24th floor on the way down.

To Colby's mind, the 24th floor was the one and only redeeming feature of the Poplar Corporation. On the 24th floor, the elevator doors opened upon a vista of tight-sweatered lusterity. And there was one, the receptionist who sat closest to the door, a tall freckled blonde with palest gold hair and startling blue eyes, who had the face of a Saxon princess.

Colby always pushed the button to the 24th floor, on the way up or down. He would bask in the glow that radiated inward. It was a pity, a pure pity, Colby thought, for such loveliness to be imprisoned in the drab, gray and dragon-guarded darkness of Poplar Corporation. Colby entertained rescue fantasies. Then the doors would close again and Colby would rise away from the land of misty reverie . . . back to the mailroom, back to the sorting stacks. And have you ever tried to sort mail with your head full of Saxon blonde princess? Poplar always got the mail intended for Mugwumpf and the bitchy box exploded with shattering regularity each day.

Today was a disappointment. The blonde was not at her desk. The rest of the harem were clustered about the windows at the far end of the room, watching some commotion outside.

The elevator doors closed and the elevator descended to the main floor.

"You can't bring that . . . that . . . *thing* out here!" snarled a uniformed guard in the lobby.

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"Why not?" asked Colby.

"Just look at it. It's freight! Go back and use the service elevator!"

Colby did not go back and use the service elevator. Exasperated, he did something he rarely did in front of strangers. He snapped his fingers. And all of a sudden, Colby simply wasn't there any more, neither he or the offending plant he was carrying.

"This day has really been a ripper," said the guard, tentatively feeling about in the sudden emptiness where Colby had been.

Colby and the plant reappeared instantaneously on the corner of Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street, to the consternation of the people who were already standing on the corner of Lexington Avenue and 42nd Street, and to whom Colby's sudden appearance had the general effect of a thunderbolt in a chicken yard . . . which is why Colby only did this in moments of extreme stress and provocation.

"Sorry about that," said Colby, shouldering his cross of a plant and heading towards the river. Visions of a gangland funeral off the end of a pier with roots imbedded in concrete filled his head. It was getting to be a real struggle. The plant was grabbing for girls on every street corner and Colby proceeded along trailing a wake of yips, yelps and pinched bottoms.

Colby dragged the plant underneath the Third Avenue Elevated tracks where the shadows (shot through with beams of sunlight) were all cool and water condensation dripping and he was all the way on the other side of the Avenue when he remembered that the Third Avenue El had been torn down, oh years before.

"It all goes to support an old theory of mine that there's more to what's going on than what's going on," said Colby.

By this time, the incorrigible plant had attracted so much attention that Colby had a following marching up

the street behind him indignantly. Colby prudently switched locations and landed on the corner of Bank and Bleecker Streets, where it was a lot less crowded.

A four engined flying boat added a mobile reference point laterally to the skyline.

"The China Clipper!" said Moscato. "And *that* only flew out of San Francisco. Oh wonderful. Wonderful! What restorative abilities. What fully developed creative complexes. It whets my appetite for stakes and chopping blocks and hot, boiling oil!"

Damaris stood up in the first car of the Third Avenue El, watching the gentle undulations of Manhattan defined by lines of shining tracks; the train rode them like a gentle ocean swell.

"Children like flying boats and squids, but *I* like riding on the front car of the Third Avenue El. Oh, I feel good today. I think I'll go for a walk in the Village."

Overhead, a great silver immensity of dirigible sailed over the city with the serene assurance of a cloud; the street canyons echoed with the golden purr of its engines. Children danced and yelled for glee to see it sail.

"It's certainly busy out here today," said Colby.

Driving down the West Side, following the path of the dirigible, his gaze riveted on its flight, Moscato did not see the young man carrying the potted plant until he was targeted directly in front of the car's glittering radiator cap.

And at that point, the young man vanished abruptly and reappeared instantaneously on the sidewalk.

"Great Saint Toad, there's one now!" exclaimed Moscato watching Colby's flapping jaw receding in his rear view mirror as Colby mouthed colloquialisms after his

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retreating bumper: the plant raised a branch in a one-fingered salute of phallic parting.

"And he's a brand new one," said Moscato, "I've never seen *him* before. I don't remember him from the old days at all. They seem to be springing up like mushrooms. Oh what rich, ripe hunting I'll have. I'll just go around the corner and park and come back down his trail. The great inquisitorial work is about to begin again!"

"I saw that!" the girl on the sidewalk told Colby. "I saw what you did. You started over there and you landed over here all at the same time."

"You!" said Colby. "You're the girl from the 24th floor."

"And you!" said Damaris, "you're the boy who always stops the elevator for no other reason but me."

Damaris was skipping in and about some chalk patterns she had sketched on the sidewalk.

"Have you noticed that things are getting awfully frantic or a lot more normal, one?" asked Colby.

"I certainly have," said Damaris. Her voice was a cross between jewels falling and nightingales singing.

"Ah . . . that little dance you do, so lightly through those little drawings there on the sidewalk. The two together wouldn't have anything to do with certain peculiar phenomenon I have chanced to observe this afternoon, would they?"

"What ever gave you an idea like that?"

"Because the dirigible changed direction rather smartly when you stepped on the point of the compass there in the pattern."

"You are most observant," said Damaris. "It's all great fun but it's tiring."

"Interesting. How often do you have to do it?"

"Fairly often. Because I'm juggling some dirigibles, flying boats and plain and fancy monsters in my head . . . and some other things I've thought of, and every

once in a while I have to stop and charge up all their batteries.”

Colby squinted up at the sky where a squadron or so of mottled Spads and tri-winged red Fokkers tangled in bright parabolas among the cumulus clouds: there was plenty of gallant rat-a-tat and most gallant of all were the gallant co-pilots who stood out on the wings, braced against the struts, and popped away at each other with sidearms.

“You seem to be having quite a day,” said Colby.

“It’s not really my best work,” said Damaris. “And my uncle is very angry about it. He’s making my eardrums itch. But if you only knew how good it feels to let loose and kick up your heels!”

“Well, of course I’m not really an expert, but I think it’s all quite good.”

“You’re only saying that so you can get to walk me home.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking along those lines, but first I have got to do something about my plant.”

“What happened to it?”

“I don’t really feel like saying.”

“Look at the poor thing. It’s growing pods all out of proportion.”

By this time they were walking along together. They had a lot to talk about. It is nice to meet people who share your own interests. Damaris did stage effects and Colby did transporting.

In the first block, Colby showed the girl the one about four dimensional hopscotch. If you had been watching you could see them flicker because they kicked the tile into the first space and followed it in (it was foggy in London and dusk, a dusk that turned the fog a rich, ripe blue; you could hear tires sizzling on pavements, it would be an evening for adventure, an evening for mystery and game afoot . . . it was clear in Kashmir and the moon reflected itself among the drifting houseboats and

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the reflected images of mountains on lakes surfaces scuffed by a wind burdened with the scent of orange blossoms (now they caught their breaths in the resting bed, then, kicked the tile out again) the first stars were winking on above Kilimanjaro's snow crests and the lions roared against the rising of the moon . . . and over the South Atlantic a flying boat swam like a great ruby against the mellowing rays of the sun . . .)

"A flying boat. *That* shouldn't be there. *That's* one of yours. How do you do it?"

"It's not difficult. All you have to do is concentrate on something pleasant, you know, use it for a fulcrum."

"Pleasant?"

"Yes, so you can get leverage with it."

"How do you mean, pleasant?"

"Well, something that you like personally. Something you can really get a handle on."

"Well let's see now. How about . . . ah . . . ice wagons."

"Ice wagons?"

"Ice wagons. Horse drawn ice wagons with big blocks of ice in them. Tasty ice. The kind of ice you can find only in the back of an ice wagon."

"Lovely," said the girl, and instantly Brooklyn, the Bronx and most of Queens was rattling to the rumble and cow-belled clunkety clunk of horse-drawn ice wagons. Happy children ran after them, leaping onto their rears to carry off the tasty ice fragments that lay therein like polished flint jellyfish.

"I see," said Colby.

They went on like that for a while.

By the time they got past the second block, Damaris had turned a park of smog-blighted trees into a stage setting that stood knee-deep in dry-ice fog and echoed with wolf howls (much to the delectation of the neighborhood children, who stood about it, shivering deliciously), all the sidewalks were yellow brick and led to

horizons shimmering with green luminosity, and an entire legend had sprung into being in the person of Awful O'Drool, who lived by himself in the gold steeple of the New York Life Building, served only by his faithful winged companion Clutches, a trained Condor with a 15-foot wingspan and who divebombed the entire city to keep O'Drool supplied with fresh fish from the Fulton Street fish market, vegetables from Washington Market, goodies from gourmet shoppies on the upper east side, and girls from every block in town upon whom he pounced with practiced skill, his sudden, darkling shadow swelling with awesome swiftness over their lovely, quickly upturned faces: O'Drool had quite a harem up there, laughing and chattering among the gold filigree of the tower.

In the third block, Moscato caught up with them.

"Very clever," said Moscato.

They turned at the sound of his voice, and Colby set the plant down.

Moscato stalked up on them. He had stopped at a meat market long enough to acquire a cleaver of impressive heftiness, its solidity asserted with a sparkling nastiness of well-honed edge.

"I have traced you a long way," Moscato told them. "There aren't many of you people left, but even a few are too many!"

Moscato turned to the girl.

"I've followed you across the years," he said. "I burned you at the stake in France but it wasn't you. I chopped your head off in Rome but it wasn't you. I quartered you between four horses but it still wasn't you. But this time I've seen your signature. I've seen your handiwork on every block in this city! And now I've got you cornered and it really is you!"

And turning his other face to Colby, he said:

"And you, what are you doing away from the office?"

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"I've got to take care of your plant, Mr. Poplar," said Colby.

"Yes, I've checked into that little matter. My incinerator has exploded. The ashes have been flushed into the harbor. All the fish in the bay are growing luminous tails! I suppose you think you're very, very funny?"

"Oh no, Mr. Poplar."

"I suppose you think I'm funny?"

"Oh no. It's not that at all. It's just that I think your breath would gag a maggot."

Three things happened almost at once.

Moscato came at them from inside the gleaming apex of a swinging cleaver stroke.

Colby stepped between the blade and Damaris, grabbed Damaris, and together, they vanished.

Moscato's follow-through brought him within range of the plant (which he had not entered into his calculations). The pod on the plant opened, displaying a sticky salivating maw lined with needle teeth, and munched up Mr. Moscato who, as he was hauled up into the air, had time to emit one hysterical hyena laugh, "Ah-hooo-haha!" (Moscato/Poplar in his final manifestation) before he vanished into the pod with a decisive CHO^oOMP!

Bank Street is a quiet sunlit street, the residence of many creative people and distinguished by the presence of an excellent teachers college . . . and a singular potted plant standing very near one of the corners. Birds sit and sing on the limbs of the plant for it is quite harmless now (having been tamed by the sound of nearby church bells), but if you were to approach and place your ear against the trunk you would hear, very deep inside, the crunching of munching mechanisms, the perculations of digestive juices, and tastefully modulated belchings.

Colby and Damaris landed mixed together in the front seat of the Coney Island Comet Coaster which was

mounting, clinkety, clankety, clink, to the top of the first big dip.

“Neat,” said Damaris.

Her hair smelled sweet as clover, sweet as grass with sunlight on it.

“It’s even more fun this way,” said Colby. “Hang on tight, we’re coming to the real big drop.”

“EEyowl!”

The bottom fell out, and they were thundering down the first descent, the tracks rushing up at them from the bottom of the dip that grew at them like a troll’s face, and Damaris was laughing in his ear, and her hair must have tickled because the next second they were f

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down a slippery jungle chute that was dark with night and swiftly ribboned with streaks of moonlight from a moon dangling just above the western horizon. The opening at the bottom of the run swelled like a shining silver coin. It was moonlight spangling the sea and the next second they shot far out over the lagoon and dove together into the sea.

They hit with a beautiful silver splash and surfaced laughing.

Drums throbbed. Surf crashed. Fishermen with torches promenaded on the reef. A plume of waterfall fell featherwise from the jungle heights to the moonlit lagoon. A streamer of nice, tangy barbecue smoke trailed over the lagoon from an all-night feast. Dawn lapped at the east.

Much later, Damaris said: “I really have the weirdest feeling that I’ve forgotten something. Like I left the water running in the bathtub, or something.”

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And indeed she had, for back in forgotten New York, the Third Avenue El was still running, the Fifth Avenue Double Decker busses were still running, all of Queens and Brooklyn and the Bronx were clunk-clunking with ice wagons, and thousands upon thousands of people were jamming the streets and all the buildings with views to watch the giant gorilla in his interminable battle with the biplanes.

The Foreigner

E. MICHAEL BLAKE

I could give you a slide show, but I don't have any slides. Tons of notes, and visual records of a sort, but no color slides. Just as well, though—a two-dimensional pattern, frozen in time, can make you receptive to the scene it depicts without allowing you to experience or understand it. The slides take you there, but leave you on the outside, a foreigner.

I know just how you feel.

I'd never been a stevedore in Cincinnati before, so I gave it a try.

"What's your name?"

"Roy Gharmaruda."

"Huh? Whatzat, Italian?"

"No, Hindu. Third generation."

The union secretary gave me the same vague look that the personnel director of the shipping outfit had given me. By that time I was pretty good at keeping a straight face.

Out on the gray Ohio a tame herd of sluggish black barges dribbled downstream. Interstate 75, among other thoroughfares, hiked up its skirts to trestle across into Covington, carrying torrents of internal combustion with it.

"Look at 'em," Ernie Passek gestured with a knock-wurst on rye, "everything's truck now. If an outfit's already on the river, it'll ship barge, maybe. But not

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enough. Look at Louisville," he knockwusted downriver, "whole town's dyin'."

I nodded, feet dangling over the edge of the pier, my dark features having blended over the weeks into acceptable riverfront swarthisness. "Same everywhere, I guess. Not so bad here, with the Stadium gettin' built and some jobs available."

A siren belched. Back to work. . . .

"All right, I think you're set, Paul—uh, what's your last name?"

"Sessudaric. Paul Sessudaric."

"Ses—" Rhoda fumbled out a pencil, grabbed a napkin. "Can you spell that?"

"Sure." I did.

"What is that, Italian?"

"No, Basque."

She thought for a second, then dismissed it. She wasn't used to considering a thing to be strange; Los Angeles restaurant owners, forever set upon by Sunset Strip freaks and other weirdos less easily classified, eventually immunize themselves to the unusual.

"Well, you know your way around," she nodded toward the bar. "About noon, it'll pick up a little. You'll have your hands full."

She smiled a little at the dark, amiable young man who would tend bar in her restaurant for a few weeks. She had spoken easily of her first husband in Tacoma, Washington; her second, in Palo Alto, from whom she was separated. She wore that fatalistic, indifferent smile I'd seen far too often in L. A.

She headed for the kitchen. I ambled over behind the bar, and waited. . . .

It just so happened that a travel agency in New Orleans needed a key-punch operator. It just so happened that I was nearby, noting with much interest that the New South was actually starting to exist.

"Okay, it looks like you know your stuff. You're hired. What'd you say your name was again?"

"Jerome Ekachokee."

"Oh, you're Italian."

"No, Seminole. Took out my citizenship when I was nineteen."

By now, maybe you've noticed a few things. . . .

You've got a science of sorts here called Anthropology. The Study of Man. For me, research in Anthropology is both easier and more difficult than it would be for you. Easier because I'm not blinded by my own cultural background. More difficult because I'm not human.

Oh, I'm pretty close—our evolution was parallel to yours. With a little cosmetic surgery I can look like any perfectly normal Hindu/Basque/Seminole/Italian. Thought processes correspond—Euclidean 3-space, linear logic, manipulative technology and a world view based on sexual and territorial motivations and built up through our equivalent of Aristotelian and Newtonian postulates. The fact that we're more advanced—interstellar flight—doesn't put me out of touch with the human condition. We're all in this together.

But, since I'm not from Earth, I can consider humanity without forcing it into another context. Anglo-Saxons may think that Arabs are cruel, ritualistic, unwashed heathens; Arabs may think in turn that Anglo-Saxons are squeamish, materialistic, blasphemous infidels. This even applies to Anthropologists of each group. But, though I may tend to think of Earth in terms of my own world, I avoid setting any culture on Earth as a standard.

I came alone, on a six and a half year research grant (6 and one-half for you, half a year for us. Any time you notice odd figures, don't bother about them. They're conversion factors from my system to yours). I landed at the South pole; then hid the ship up in the asteroid belt.

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Then began the journeying—I had six and a half years to encapsulate an entire world in notes and videotapes.

Six and a half years of incessant travelling and meeting people gives one ample opportunity to go native and fall in love, but it never happened. I was very fond of a young woman in Bolivia who was studying to be a journalist; shacking up for a month with those three go-go dancers in Singapore was loads of fun; then there was an agriculturist in Tanzania with a classic figure, a factory worker in Bucharest with hidden gypsy passion, even a housewife in Winnipeg . . .

But I never actually *fell in love*, per se. Maybe it was my training—since I had so much to cover in so little time, I put myself under a sort of conditioning (analogous to hypnosis) compelling me to do nothing more than scratch the surface of any group, rooting out information without making any big commitment. To make this even more effective, I usually posed as a foreigner—in which guise one is usually tolerated without being trusted (as long as it isn't a foreigner from a *rival* nation). Exclusion yields freedom of movement. Great for straight observation and study.

I modified that game plan in the U. S. A.; it's such an ethnic hash, I got the foreigner effect simply by posing as a member of a really obscure (or nonexistent) minority. This was more subtle—by using an uncommon ethnic handle I prevented my interlocutors from getting a solid first impression of me. From then on, I could be friends with them, but they wouldn't miss me much when I moved on.

But mostly, I was just *The Foreigner*. . . .

The records in Reykjavik show that I was the only Panamanian in Iceland for a two-week period. Which means, of course, that there were *no* Panamanians in Iceland for a two-week period. . . .

It was almost four years before I started to get home-

sick. I wasn't even conscious of it until I realized I was standing alone on a beach in Senegal, in the middle of the night, staring at the sky. . . .

While roaming through Turkey on an excellent hand-forged Somailan passport, I was confronted by a fanatically serious student (of the kind that supports, or perhaps initiates, all those International Days of Solidarity with Someone-or-other). Surely I would lend my full intellectual resources to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. I could not rest while Anglo-Zionist warmongers continued to oppress the peoples of Asia, while sucking precious oil to power imperialist and counterrevolutionary ventures all around the globe. I must do my utmost to hasten the People's Execution of the Traitor Hussein.

For the most part, I've found Earth interesting. But I seem to run into more than my share of bores. . . .

It didn't take me long to realize that no one, Foreigner or Native, is safe in Belfast. . . .

I awoke suddenly one night in Oslo, a lissome young model asleep in my arms. I was uneasy. Without disturbing her, I reached over to my coat. One-handed, I fished around in the lining until I found the remote switch.

I lay there in the dark, peering at the device that would summon my ship from the asteroid belt in ten months. There's no point in my listing what, exactly, made me want to go home. It wasn't fear of World War III or eco-catastrophe or anything—I've seen worlds in worse shape; Home isn't a whole lot better than Earth—but I wanted more than anything just to be somewhere . . . where I could settle down and commit myself. All this time I'd been a transient in a fantasy world. Now I wanted reality back.

From then on, I became terribly self-centered. Leaving that morning was my last sight of my gentle young companion, with her own hopes and needs. And soon I forgot her name. . . .

The Foreigner

Detroit's summertime Ethnic Festivals were a few scattered bright spots in an otherwise depressing, overpopulated, underdiversified city. The air down at the ethnic boardwalk bristled seductively to the strains of traditional song and the tang of homemade Old World fare. Beefy descendants of the mother country, who in their own time knew only white or blue collar, caroused in native dress called up from some dim ancestral memory.

Artificial? No more than any cultural distinctions.

This was one of the white ethnic festivals, Slavic syllables and flea-market hawkers everywhere. Six accordions, spread out along the boardwalk, melded into a vague, trilling scream. Two blacks, in Fuller dome afro hair and dashikis, roamed among the stalls a few steps behind me. I overheard: "Man, these whitey ethnics really tryin' t'polarize. Gap gettin' worse."

"Straight 'head, bro," the other responded.

I glanced back after a while. Both of them had stopped before a corpulent, red-faced, sixtyish man in a small stall swollen with sausages. All three were laughing their heads off.

I smiled around at the whole boardwalk, enjoying it. But I couldn't stop looking at my watch . . .

Since activating the ship for a landing pattern three days before, my nerves had progressively knotted. Anything could go wrong—the radar shroud could break down, making the ship a sitting duck for interceptor missiles (how's NORAD supposed to know it's not from Russia or China? Too bad I couldn't get back to the South Pole, where that wouldn't have mattered.), the autopilot may be just a hair off, and plunge the ship into Lake St. Clair. Anything. It might be years before I was missed back home, years more before any rescue operation could be funded and assembled.

But I still had a good two hours to kill before I could start fine-tuning the approach. Why not enjoy 'em?

I stopped at one stall for some steaming, pungent soup (I knew at the time what nationality this festival was for—but in light of what happened later I've forgotten). The woman there was all native finery, except for her glasses (Sears Optical). She engaged me in conversation about the Chrysler plant layoffs and Leonard Woodcock and how you just aren't safe in the streets at night any more. All this time, she seemed to be checking me out.

Finally: "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. It's Aaron Torupele."

"Oh, Italian?" she drew back/stood straighter.

"Nope. Portuguese. Good soup, how much do I owe you?"

A few blocks from the boardwalk, back in the real Detroit, I stood alone on a rooftop in the solidifying darkness. Below, a patch of light and accordion-based murmurs pinpointed the toy merriment of the festival. Above, my ship was decelerating through the lower ionosphere. Slowly I fingered the remote switch, keeping the tiny white dot dead in the center of the detector screen. It was a time of shifting weight, swallowing, sweat.

The white dot died.

A moment's paralysis.

Jerkily I cranked up the screen's intensity—and caught a blast of negative feedback that nearly fried both my hands. I dropped the switch with a gasp; it lay humming angrily on the roof.

I could only stare, gulping breath, at the sky. After about a minute, I got cogent enough to start asking why—collision? Interception? Internal malfunction?

Now the pain. The loss. The total disorientation of having ones states of reality and fantasy literally reversed—Earth, evermore, would be reality. The tearless sobbing in my throat.

All the instincts I'd developed, all the techniques of scratching the surface of a social unit, were useless. Now

The Foreigner

it was necessary for me to settle down in this welter of ethnic pigeonholes and genealogical cross-referencing. The hypno-conditioning was frayed at the edges; now, in light of this, it would dissolve. Gone was the Malayan in Morocco, the Canadian in Hungary, the Armenian in Paraguay. Somehow, after five minutes of breathing slowly through my teeth, staring at that blot of raido gore in the sky, and swallowing, I really did accept all this. Really.

Why did I have to pick *Detroit*? The festival, people celebrating, reminded me of . . . Never mind, you've never been there, you can't appreciate the significance.

A tall, long-haired woman came up beside me. "Isn't this wonderful? I'm so glad people don't have to be ashamed of their nationality any more, no matter how small or different."

'Small'—meaning one, I thought, still a little self-piteous. 'Different'—meaning planet of origin. I could bend your ethnic big-heartedness a little, lady.

"For instance, I'm Lithuanian," she beamed around the boardwalk, "and I'm not ashamed to admit it. What are you?"

Lost. Lonely. Homeless. The Foreigner. The outsider who's coming in, right now.

"Italian," I managed to smile, "what else?"

*Can there ever be an end to the universe—
and end to time itself?*

Fountain of Force

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI AND GRANT CARRINGTON

Fleming Mayhew visualized a universe peppered with rat holes. Matter was disappearing from Einstein's universe, streaming through holes punched into space by stars undergoing gravitational collapse, and returning to normal space seconds, hours or days later in time—sometimes beyond the island universes, often popping back into the galaxy only megaparsecs away. Mankind's starships traversed these gravitational sink holes, charting regular points of entry and re-entry, finding new holes to maintain a reasonably useful galaxy wide system.

Unfortunately the nearest exit to Sol fell a half light year short, making it difficult to go to Earth as a tourist. He would have to take two years out of his life in stasis aboard a local shuttle to get to Earth—like traveling on a donkey after coming halfway across the galaxy. His job would never give him that much time off. He was too valuable, and sometimes he resented the fact.

"Don't feel too bad about it, Mayhew. Less than one per cent of the galaxy's human population has ever been to the Earth system. It's not a unique birthplace for humankind; there are too many. Just because you and I branch from there . . ." Sita Rahman continued taking readings from the microelectrodes planted in Fleming Mayhew's shaved scalp. She turned a dial carefully on the instrument console. "What does that feel like?"

"Like you're tickling my pleasure center with

strawberry-flavored spaghetti," he said, rolling his eyes upward to look at her standing in front of him. She was a short woman with closely cropped black hair and large brown eyes.

"What's spaghetti?"

"An old earth food."

"Still on that. I thought you were giving me some attention just now."

The light over the medical bay entrance flashed; the door slid open, letting in the stocky form of Jack Bergier, nominal captain of the starship *Robert B. Leighton*, second in command to Percept Fleming Mayhew.

"You look determined. What is it, Captain?"

"Another signal message chasing us; this one was a bit old by the time we got it from the nearest base. Hans Pavel is missing." He handed Fleming Mayhew the slip of paper.

"What's the order?" Sita asked.

Fleming looked at the paper. "We're to proceed to Epsilon Lyrae immediately."

"The new rat hole near Epsilon Lyrae," Captain Bergier said, "has swallowed two Percept-starship teams already."

"Two?" asked Sita, raising her eyebrows.

Bergier nodded. "The first was a young Percept on his first cruise. They discovered the anomaly, reported it to Vega IV and started the standard probe approach prior to charting. When they didn't report back within three days Pavel was sent. He also took a standard approach, sending back a running account. At five hundred kilometers, the transmission cut off."

"Perhaps he entered the hole and came out between two galactic systems," Sita said.

Bergier shook his head. "They would have said they were going in first, which they didn't."

"Five hundred kilometers you said, Jack?"

"Right. I doublechecked with Vega."

Fountain of Force

"What's the hole's diameter?"

"A little more than that."

"There's never been a hole bigger than ten kilometers,"

Fleming said.

"We've charted thousands, but this one is huge," Bergier said.

"Why did we get called?" asked Sita.

"Fleming is the closest experienced Percept."

"Well, as his physician, I'd better get him in shape," she said.

Fleming watched her as she looked at his shaved head and began to remove the needles.

"Take a rest, Sita—use some of your back leave. You don't have to go."

"If you went to hell, Fleming," she said, "I'd have to go too. You're a piece of equipment that has to be in top shape."

"Put him to sleep, Sita," Bergier said. "He's got a lot of work ahead of him."

Two observer starships were waiting for the *Robert B. Leighton* when she arrived at Epsilon Lyrae.

"Just look at them." Fleming's mouth twisted into a wry smile. "We're the guinea pigs and they're going to watch." He turned to Captain Bergier. "When do we start?"

"*Swift* will send a drone probe in first."

Fleming nodded. "Let me know when—I'll follow it as it goes in."

Later Fleming's eyes were covered with sensing pads and earplugs played a sibilant wash of white noise into his mind through the microelectrodes which had again been inserted into the scar tissue pockets in his skull.

Nearby, Sita Rahman sat at the med console monitoring his body functions and the precisely measured micro-flow of hallucinogens into his blood stream.

The ship's computer waited in programmed patience

until Sita connected Fleming's mind, then it began a stream of tests.

A series of differential equations flashed across Fleming's closed field of vision. He stored them in the computer's work memory banks and activated the proper solution subroutines, which took the data and computed the answers. At a critical juncture the computer queried Fleming for the proper path to follow. Fleming activated the Runge-Kutta approximation in thirty-three steps. The computer compared Fleming's methods and delay times to the preferred answers in its banks and continued the tests.

Fleming ran problems in human psychology and motivation, radar sensing distortions and vectors, and other simulated situations. A minute after Sita connected Fleming with the computer it had compared his answers and methods with the desired results and weighed his failures and successes. Then it projected a series of Hinton hypercubes onto Fleming's field of vision.

The multi-colored cubes rotated slowly, revealing lines of distortion and plane surfaces covered with light. Fleming concentrated on them, traced the edges to a right-angled juncture and followed the fourth perpendicular into four-space.

The computer was warming him up deftly.

Suddenly it opened its circuits fully and the *Robert B. Leighton* became Fleming Mayhew's body. His eyes detected radar impulses, his ears the sighing of the stellar winds; his voice was a laser beam flickering out to the nearby observational starships.

And the full range of his sensors from far below the infrared to beyond the ultraviolet showed him the splendor of the star which had collapsed upon itself, punching a hole into the fabric of space, letting matter stream through into another part of the universe, leaving only a black cave.

He was still too distant to see the hole itself in all four

Fountain of Force

dimensions, but he sensed the stream of matter being drawn in, coalescing into a whirlpool, radiating at frequencies beyond the range of his human self, fed to him by the computer and visualized by him as a fountain of rainbow colors.

Fleming inhaled the spectacle, lingering over each of the streamers: hydrogen, radiating at the twenty-one centimeter band, a rich royal purple; helium, a vivid spring green; a sudden mass of oxygen atoms, scarce, swirling in a small nebula of crimson then sucked into the gaping cavity in the fabric of space, to appear megaparsecs away. The picture was unchanging, yet always different.

Inside his human self, in the soft creature contained by the starship, he could barely sense the beings who cared for him: dependable Jack Bergier, with a hangover of care nibbling at the back of his mind; Sita Rahman, watching her dials and meters intently, ready to bring him out if the machine-man linkage should anything go wrong.

There was another presence, beyond his starship size body, and Fleming reached out a tendril of thought to probe it. It was another Percept, a cadet, observing from the *Ernest Swift*, a bright red thread of fear running through his mind. Fleming revealed his own thoughts to him, showing his own fears and the controls by which he harnessed them.

Is Professor Weisberg still at the Academy?

The stars twinkled with laughter. *Yes. Last week he slipped salt into the sugar dispensers in the faculty lounge. The stars darkened. Do you think Hans Pavel is all right?*

I don't know . . .

They exchanged some information about the hole and Fleming showed the young cadet what he had just seen. He withdrew when the drone left the *Swift*, maintaining only a wisp of communication so that the cadet would see how Fleming Mayhew worked.

The drone spiralled toward the anomaly, radioing back its conventional measurements. Fleming followed it carefully, holding back. The g-flux slowly increased as the drone approached the hole; no light photons could escape from the hole but there was a slight blue shift in light coming toward the drone from the rest of the galaxy. The light encountered pockets of gas more frequently and the velocity of the pockets increased as the drone came closer to the hole.

Then the mass detector went off the scale, and the drone was sucked into the anomaly so quickly that Fleming was barely able to follow its path. The computer whispered to him that it had taken 250 microseconds for the drone to disappear. He had followed it so closely that for a moment afterward he could almost see where it had gone.

He thought of time. . . .

The *Robert B. Leighton* approached the hole, but not on the standard probe approach taken by the two lost starships. Fleming had computed a shallow parabola with an apex barely inside the sudden gravitational increase encountered by the drone. The rest of the crew were strapped in, helpless while Fleming controlled the ship with his mind.

A tendril of thought reached out to him from the *Ernest Swift*. He held it, strengthening it to a pillar. *Hang on, youngster*. The stars were cold.

Warm nights in the pale crystal port of Nellean with a glass of smooth Altair wine . . . The dancing girls of New Frisco with blue hair billowing about their ankles . . . Sita's cool touch on his arm in the mists of awakening . . .

A tear crept out of Fleming's eyes, to be absorbed by the sensing pad; fear was a steel fist around his brain, ready to crush it into a gray pulp.

The *Leighton* gathered speed, Fleming's senses reaching out ahead of it.

Fountain of Force

A flare of white-hot brilliance blinded him, as the *Leighton* lurched toward the anomaly like a toy on a rubber band. He stared into an ebony lake. In a moment his eyes would fall into it and sink like stones. Fleming fired the forward impulse engines, driving the starship back. His eyes were flaming pools of agony. His four-dimensional sight was gone, but the ship's sensors were unaffected. The pillar of communication with the cadet was silent; the youngster was unconscious. The *Leighton's* structure complained from the opposing forces playing with it. The pillar of communication disappeared as the cadet's physician woke him from his trance. Fleming reached out with laser tongues to talk to the other ships. The *Leighton* strained away from the hole, then acceleration rapidly as she broke loose.

Less than a minute and a half had passed since Fleming had been blinded. As he relaxed, his intuitive imagination pieced together what he had experienced and he knew what he had seen. . . .

Fleming's eyes, though physically uninjured, were still burning when he came out of his trance-like state. He looked up at Sita's anxious face and was surprised at the clearness of his vision.

"What happened? Do you know what happened?" Captain Bergier was insistent.

"Can't we wait until he gets some rest?" Sita said angrily.

Fleming's vision suddenly rippled like the surface of a pond, hurting his eyes. He shook his head and said, "No, Sita. I think we'd better get a preliminary report out right away." His voice sounded remarkably steady to him. "There's nothing really strange about the hole itself—it's big. But it's the outstream that makes it unique."

"What do you mean?" Bergier asked.

"The outstream goes forward in time, Jack. Time is affected in this rathole tunnel."

"But we've thought about the effect on time inside a hop-tunnel," Sita said, "and we know time goes forward in them at the normal rate. What are you talking about, Mayhew?"

He closed his eyes from the pain and sat back in his couch, saying, "This one goes forward in time. The out-stream empties into the gravitational collapse of our universe some 100 billion years from now. It's a titanic black hole all by itself."

"Then Pavel . . ." Sita started to say.

"Is dead, or hopelessly lost. Somehow, you see, I ran into some light photons in the hole—ran full face into them, almost blinding myself."

Sadness entered Sita's brown eyes. "Poor Pavell" she whispered.

"This will be something for the theoretical boys," Berger said, stroking his chin. "The cosmos collapses into a black hole of its own—and I suppose it punches out to expand in a new space."

Fleming nodded his agreement. "Another universe, created by all the matter and energy streaming from the black hole finale of ours, expanding the fabric of a new space. A fountain of force carving out a place *somewhere* for all the new expanding matter."

He stopped talking, exhausted, thinking: later rat holes will appear in that universe, as in ours, making interstellar travel possible. But they will be the first holes in a sinking ship, holes leading from one part of the ship to another. And one day there will be a large hole like this one, emptying into a black abyss . . .

Which is a new beginning.

For now, his job was done. He slept.



Science fiction has been a favorite form of the movie for many years, but there is almost no dramatic s-f available for the stage. John Jakes does his bit to correct that lack, in the hopes that other writers will seize his example, and work in this direction.

Stranger With Roses

JOHN JAKES

STRANGER WITH ROSES

a science fiction entertainment
in one act

by

JOHN JAKES

based on his short story

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CAST OF CHARACTERS:

SARI CHILDS, a housewife
DAVID CHILDS, her husband
VINCENT DEEM, their boarder
ANDROID CLERK
STOCKHAUSEN, a scientist

The play is divided into six scenes. The lights are lowered briefly between each, to denote the passage of time.

PLACE: a home on the outskirts of a large western city
TIME: summer, 1997



SCENE 1

(SETTING: the living room of the Childs home. Left Center, there is a white vinyl sectional sofa. Down Left, a chair. The household communications console is located Down Right, but its control panel faces upstage; we see only its sculptured back. On top of the console at the upstage end stands a small white vase of colorful artificial flowers. There are no walls. The living room is only sketched in by the key pieces of furniture.

Across the back of the stage, the drop is lighted in various scenes to suggest the time of day or night. Up Right Center, in front of the drop, is a platform representing a porch outside the house.

Three stage entrances are used: Down Right, leading from the living-room to a foyer and then outdoors; Down Left, leading upstairs to the spare room and the family sleeping space; and Left, leading to a dining room and kitchen.

AT RISE: the sound of a soft chime, twice. Lights come up on the platform and the back-drop—simmering yellow, to suggest the heat of full summer. VINCENT DEEM is standing on the porch, his suitcase in his hand. He is a gentle-looking, almost sad man in his late 40's, and he moves and speaks with a certain courtly air. He has a flowing mustache. DEEM is obviously nervous and uncomfortable; his black, fur-col-

lared overcoat is plainly too warm for the weather. He presses a bill in the imaginary wall in front of him. The chime sounds again. In a moment, SARI CHILDS is silhouetted as she enters from the kitchen, L. The lights come up full stage. SARI is a pretty young woman in her late 20's, sensitive, but with a certain drawn look to her face. She wears a bright-colored vest suit, quite modern looking in contrast to DEEM's nondescript clothes. She goes to the communications console, presses a button)

SARI

(Speaking to the view screen we cannot see)

Yes?

DEEM

(Startled by the voice out of nowhere)

Good morning. Ah—may I ask where you are?

SARI

Inside. Beyond that wall in front of you. I'm watching you on the view screen.

DEEM

View—? Oh. Oh, yes. I hope I have the right house? One-twenty Alpha Parkway?

SARI

That's correct. Can you hear me all right?

DEEM

Oh, perfectly. I saw your notice in the paper—

(By this time, DEEM has nervously shifted from his original position, prompting SARI's interruption:)

SARI

Excuse me, would you please move a little to the left? Nearer the lens?

DEEM

Lens?

Stranger with Roses

SARI

The security camera is trained on the center of the porch.

DEEM

Oh, of course. (He moves) Here?

SARI

That's fine. (She is frowning at something she sees on the screen) Now what was it you wanted?

DEEM

I'm hunting a place to stay. There don't seem to be many available here in—this city. I read your newspaper notice and came at once.

(SARI, still disturbed, doesn't answer. The silence stretches, until:)

DEEM

Pardon me—are you there?

SARI

I'm here.

DEEM

Is anything wrong?

SARI

(Lying)

Certainly not.

DEEM

Do you have a room for rent?

SARI

Yes, but . . . It's rather expensive.

DEEM

I'm not overly concerned about price. I wonder, Mrs.—?

SARI

Childs. Mrs. Childs.

DEEM

Might I come in? The sun's very hot this morning, and it would be easier if we could talk face to face.

SARI

Yes, I suppose . . . I'll unlock the door. (Presses a button on the console) There, its' open. Follow the arcade on your right, turn left, and come right on through the foyer.

DEEM

Thank you very much.

(Deem exits UR, enters a moment later DR. His face shines with sweat)

DEEM

(Setting bag down)

Ah—that's heavy. Do you always keep your door locked, Mrs. Childs?

SARI

In a city of twenty million people, it's wise.

DEEM

But you live quite far from the center of town.

SARI

Didn't you take the monorail?

DEEM

Part way. I walked the rest. Frankly, I'm worn out.

SARI

(Lamely)

Forgive me. Please sit down, Mr. —?

DEEM

Vincent Deem. Thank you.

(Taking his back with him to the sofa, he sits)

DEEM

You know, while I was on the porch, I couldn't tell from your tone whether you really wanted to rent the room.

(SARI seems to be staring through him. He reacts:)

DEEM

If you're not feeling well—

SARI

What? No, I'm fine.

Stranger with Roses

DEEM

(Pointed)

Is the room available?

SARI

(Hesitant)

Yes—

DEEM

Is it a small room?

SARI

Actually, it's quite large.

DEEM

That sounds ideal.

SARI

(Abrupt)

Mr. Deem, it's unusual for someone to walk even part way from the central city in weather like this. Or any weather.

DEEM

Unusual? Well, perhaps so. (A smile) I simply wanted to get the feel of the place.

SARI

Did you just arrive here?

DEEM

This very morning. Despite the heat, I find your city extremely pleasant. So many splendid towers! I'm hoping to stay a good long time.

SARI

You're from somewhere else, then.

DEEM

Correct. (A short sigh) It's so comfortable in here. I was very glad to get in out of the sun. Now concerning the room—

SARI

(Pointing DL)

It's upstairs. Large, as I said, with a fine view. The win-

dows are shielded glass. There a health ray over the bed, a three-D set—

DEEM

Might I see it?

SARI

I mentioned that the rent is high—

DEEM

How high?

SARI

Fifty credits a month.

DEEM

Perfectly agreeable.

SARI

But—

DEEM

Mrs. Childs, is the price really as high as you say?

SARI

What?

DEEM

Or is there some reason you don't want to rent me the room? Have I offended you in any way?

SARI

Of course not. I—I'm just a bit tired. (A vague gesture: her hand passes across her face) I haven't been too well recently. I must apologize.

DEEM

Please don't. I merely wanted to be certain I'd done nothing to upset you.

SARI

You haven't. I'll be happy to show you the room.

DEEM

I'm sure it will be fine. Would you like a month's rent in advance?

Stranger with Roses

SARI

If you don't mind.

DEEM

Not at all. Here— (Fishes in his pocket) Ah, I forgot. I'm afraid I have nothing but very large bills. I'll have one changed later today and pay you this evening, if that's satisfactory.

SARI

Yes. Now if you'd like to go upstairs—

DEEM

(Nodding)

By the way. Does the price of fifty— (Hesitates) Fifty credits include meals?

SARI

It does.

DEEM

That's excellent. I know I'll enjoy dining with you and Mr. Childs.

SARI

David.

DEEM

A fine old name. Are there children?

SARI

Not so far.

DEEM

What does your husband do?

SARI

He works in the War Claims Bureau, at the government park just a mile from here. He should be home for lunch soon.

DEEM

War claims. Indeed. An unusual occupation.

SARI

David's a claims adjuster. After seventeen years, you'd think that everyone who claimed damages from the

bombings, and the riots afterward, would be taken care of. But you've no idea of the legal complications. How time-consuming each case can be.

DEEM

I'm sure I don't. Seventeen years. I sometimes forget it's been that long since . . . the war.

SARI

David said the Bureau will probably be in existence for another seventeen years at least. What's your field, Mr. Deem?

DEEM

(Seeming not to hear)

I wonder if I might see the room now. I'd like to unpack, then lie down for a bit. The long walk was more tiring than I anticipated.

SARI

(Reaching for his bag)

May I help you with that?

DEEM

(Stepping in front of her) No! (Recovers) I couldn't permit a lady to carry my luggage.

SARI

(Giving him a sharp look)

All right, Mr. Deem. This way, please.

(On his way DL, DEEM passes the console, pauses by the vase of artificial flowers)

DEEM

Very pretty. (Touches flowers) Oh. Artificial.

SARI

Why, naturally.

DEEM

(Touching the console)

A most unusual piece of furniture.

SARI

I'm afraid that's the economy model. Just the basic com-

Stranger with Roses

munications options—the porch security camera hookup and the picture phone. Next year we hope to add the computer terminal.

DEEM

(A private thought)

Mmmm.

SARI

(Sensing his amazement)

Surely you've seen a console like that before.

DEEM

Of course, Mrs. Childs. Of course I have. What makes you think otherwise?

(She looks at him a moment, then turns and exits DL. DEEM takes a firmer grip on his bag. Suddenly there is intense emotion on his face. He looks around, as if in wonder at his surroundings. Then relief overwhelms him. He touches the bag, almost reverently. Then he follows SARI off DL. as:

THE LIGHTS FADE

SCENE 2

(The lights fade up as DAVID CHILDS enters DR. The backdrop is still lit hot yellow. DAVID is a sensible, steady type in his early 30's. He wears a vest suit cut much like his wife's, though of a more conservative color)

DAVID

Sari? Hey, Sari, I'm home.

(She enters L)

SARI

Fifteen minutes early.

DAVID

Because I'm starved. (Kisses her cheek) We wrapped up that nuclear poisoning business.

SARI

The Armstrong case? (He nods) Oh, David, that must be a big relief. It seems as if you've been working on that one claim forever.

DAVID

(Relaxed, smiling)

I felt so damn good, finally finishing it, I wanted to celebrate. (Kisses her lips lightly) By bringing you a present. Something special. Crazy, Like . . . flowers.

SARI

(Warm laugh)

You're a treasure.

DAVID

I'd have gone anywhere on this earth to find you a bouquet of real flowers. I'd have paid anything to have walked in here with a replacement for these— (Flicks the artificial flowers contemptuously; smiles again) At least you know my intentions were in the right place.

SARI

We had a garden when I was small. have I ever told you? (DAVID shakes his head) With real flowers. Jonquils, asters, tulips, lilacs—and roses. The smell was indescribably sweet. (For a moment, she's lost in reverie. Then:) How did the Armstrong business come out?

DAVID

The Bureau found for the plaintiff. A million and a half in damages.

SARI

So much!

DAVID

The Armstrongs lost three children. And the fourth is still crippled. Their lawyers had a well prepared case. They

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proved conclusively that the workers at the government nuclear substation near the Armstrong home did in fact riot, right along with the rest of the mobs that day. The workers damaged the equipment at the substation, the shields, releasing all that radiation—you know, sometimes I wonder how long it will take us to lay the ghosts of the war. Our own people did more harm than the enemy's bombs. (Beat) Anyway, the case is closed. And I'm still starved.

SARI

Lunch is almost ready. I got a little behind this morning.

DAVID

(Noticing her strained expression)

Sari, you're not feeling . . . that way again?

SARI

(Emphatic shake of her head)

Three months in the hospital were quite enough. I don't intend to be sent back.

DAVID

Did you do any work on your new painting?

SARI

No time. I had to call in the week's order to the market. Then Mr. Deem arrived.

DAVID

Mister who?

SARI

Deem. Our new boarder. I rented the room.

DAVID

Terrific! We can certainly use the extra income.

SARI

I'm not sure it's all that terrific.

DAVID

Why not?

SARI

I don't much like the man.

DAVID

For what reason?

SARI

No reason I can put my finger on. But the moment he showed up on the porch, I had—call it a negative reaction.

DAVID

I'd like to have a look at him.

SARI

He's gone out.

DAVID

Where?

SARI

He didn't tell me.

DAVID

What does he do? What's his line of work?

SARI

I wish I knew.

DAVID

(Taking hold of her shoulders gently)

He really got to you!

SARI

I'm afraid so.

DAVID

Look, we don't need the money that badly. Let's get rid of him if he's the wrong sort.

SARI

Oh, it's probably ridiculous. And probably part of the very thing that put me in the hospital in the first place. The loneliness of this house—

DAVID

(Gently)

The children we haven't been able to have. . . . Plus that over-active artist's imagination of yours. Exactly what did he do, this—?

Stranger with Roses

SARI

Deem.

DAVID

What did he do to upset you?

SARI

That's the problem. Nothing.

DAVID

There must have been something. Was he rude?

SARI

If anything, he's overly polite. He speaks softly but . . . He disturbs me, that's all.

DAVID

What disturbs you? His behavior?

SARI

(Small voice)

Just . . . him.

DAVID

Then you really do mean there's no concrete reason to dislike him.

SARI

(Still softly)

None.

DAVID

(After a thoughtful pause)

You know what that says to me, Sari.

SARI

(Unhappy)

I know.

DAVID

You can't let the phantoms start deviling you again. You have to push them away. Face reality—

SARI

I couldn't help what happened, David. I looked at him and I was frightened.

DAVID

Then try to tell me why. Specifically.

SARI

When I showed him the room, he couldn't wait to get me out. He slammed the door.

DAVID

That's no crime! Sari . . .

SARI

(Afraid of what's coming)

Yes?

DAVID

I can't allow you to begin imagining things again. I can't listen to—suspicions, unless they're based on something concrete. Which, in the light of what you've told me, I frankly doubt.

SARI

His clothes . . .

DAVID

(Startled)

Clothes?

SARI

When he arrived, he was wearing a black coat with a fur collar. And the sun is so hot today!

DAVID

(Shrug)

Perhaps he's eccentric. Or just cold-blooded.

SARI

Don't be snide. I'm trying not to let it start again, David. I know that all the dangers I imagined—the fears that put me in the hospital—I know there was no real base for them, except . . . in my mind. But I swear, his clothes are . . . different.

DAVID

In what way?

Stranger with Roses

SARI

I'm not exactly sure.

DAVID

(A soft warning)

Sari—

SARI

(Desperate)

Small differences! So small, they almost go unnoticed. The cut of his clothing is—peculiar. Old fashioned. It's almost as if he reached into some ancient refuse bin and put on the first thing he found.

DAVID

(After another considered pause)

I think another visit to the doctor might be in order.

SARI

David, I am not imagining—

DAVID

A moment ago, you agreed that you were.

SARI

I know, but . . .

DAVID

You said your suspicions were unfounded. You even used the word ridiculous.

SARI

(Confused)

Yes. No. I—please don't look at me that way. It isn't happening again. It isn't!

DAVID

Then tell me precisely, and in detail—what is wrong with this Mr. Deem?

SARI

When you meet him . . .

DAVID

I intend to.

SARI

Tonight, at dinner, you'll see . . .

DAVID

And if I don't?

SARI

(Slow, chilling realization)

That means it IS happening again, doesn't it?

(DAVID hesitates a moment, unable to hide his sorrow and deep dismay. Then, recovering, forcing himself to be protective, he puts his arm around her)

DAVID

Let's have lunch.

SARI

(Jerking away)

I'm not hungry.

DAVID

Sari, please.

SARI

Leave me alone!

(She moves away from him, stops, turns, looks at him, suddenly rushes back)

SARI

Oh David, I'm sorry. You're right. It's only imagination. Don't send me back to the doctor. I'm just tired. I'll rest this afternoon. Rest is what I need. And—I'll work on my painting! That's good therapy—the doctor said so! Mr. Deem is harmless. There's nothing wrong with the man, and he doesn't frighten me—he doesn't frighten me one bit . . .

(She buries her head on his shoulder. DAVID touches the back of her head, gently, but his face shows his grief)

SLOW DIMOUT

SCENE 3

(Lights fade up as a soft chime is heard. The backdrop lighting suggests red dusk. Up Left center, against the backdrop and facing front, stands the ANDROID CLERK. Ostensibly male, the ANDROID is a gray, expressionless creature wearing a dull, neutral smock. In response to the chime, SARI enters from L, goes to the console, punches it on. Throughout the scene, she looks down at the screen, where she is seeing the ANDROID's image)

SARI

The Childs residence.

ANDROID

(Still looking straight front)

Good afternoon, Mrs. Childs. This is Raymond Seven Two Three, your personal android shopper.

SARI

Yes, Raymond. Didn't you get my grocery order?

ANDROID

Your order is in order, Mrs. Childs. It will be delivered first thing tomorrow. I am calling in connection with a friend of yours.

SARI

Who?

ANDROID

Perhaps I should more properly say acquaintance. A Mr. V. Deem. He stopped here at the market shortly after lunch. He wished to change a number of large bills. He gave your name as a reference.

SARI

He's our new boarder.

ANDROID

So he stated. I subjected the bills to careful scrutiny, since they seemed unusual.

SARI

In what way?

ANDROID

Old. Very old indeed. Printed on much heavier paper stock than the Treasury uses now. However, a few bills of that antique vintage still circulate, and the ones Mr. Deem presented proved genuine. So I provided him with the required change. I would have thought no more of it, had he not asked a question which I considered peculiar.

SARI

What did he ask you, Raymond?

ANDROID

He wished to know what year it was.

SARI

What YEAR—?

ANDROID

When I replied that it was 1997, he seemed both surprised and pleased.

SARI

(Trying to laugh)

He knows the year, Raymond. I'm sure he does.

ANDROID

Nevertheless, Mrs. Childs, I distinctly heard him ask.

SARI

You must have made a mistake.

ANDROID

I was manufactured to eliminate all potential for making mistakes. Mr. V. Deem definitely asked about the year. Since he claimed to be your boarder, I believed you should be aware of his puzzling behavior. No doubt there is a suitable explanation, and . . .

Stranger with Roses

(SARI has turned away from the console and is looking toward DEEM's room, DL)

ANDROID

(Continuing)

I hope you are not offended by my contacting you about . . . Mrs. Childs? I can no longer see you on the screen.

(SARI stares straight front, one hand pressed to her mouth)

ANDROID

Mrs. Childs? Are you there?

THE LIGHTS FADE

SCENE 4

(Lights fade up on the set. The backdrop is darkened, suggesting night. SARI enters L, followed by DAVID)

SARI

Thanks for helping me clean up.

DAVID

(Sits)

That's the first word you've said since you called dinner.

SARI

(Glancing DR)

I can't help it. There's something about the man . . .

DAVID

Now Sari, don't start—

SARI

Why won't you believe me? Why can't you see?

DAVID

Because there's nothing to see! Except a rather innocuous middle-aged boarder who seems to have next to no opinions on the state of the world—or anything.

SARI

That's part of it too! Every question you asked at dinner—every one!—he simply muttered. You couldn't understand his answer—if he had one!

DAVID

And I suppose if he were a loud mouthed boor, you'd find something suspicious in that. I don't consider Deem abnormal. Just dull. Where is he, anyway?

SARI

(Moving to console)

He said he wanted a bit of air. (Pushes button, watches the screen) Come here, David.

(Dim area lighting fades up to reveal DEEM standing on the porch platform)

SARI

Look at him.

DAVID

(Beside her, watching screen)

On the porch. So?

SARI

Don't you notice it?

DAVID

Notice what?

SARI

His expression! Look at the way he's staring at the city. Like a total stranger.

DAVID

Because he is a stranger. To this city, anyway. He makes no secret of it.

SARI

But what about his clothes?

DAVID

It's narrowminded to consider a man odd because he wears old fashioned clothes. That's his right.

Stranger with Roses

(DAVID punches console off. Lights fade on DEEM)

DAVID

(Taking a deep breath)

Sari—I hate to say this—but if you keep raising these hobgoblins simply because Deem doesn't fit some pre-conceived pattern in your mind . . . If you keep on that way, I'm going to insist you make another appointment with the doctor.

SARI

(Her trump card)

He asked Raymond what year it was.

DAVID

He asked who what?

SARI

Raymond Seven Two Three. The android at the market. Before Deem paid me the rent this afternoon, he went to the market to change some large bills. Old bills, Raymond said. Old.

DAVID

For God's sake, maybe the man's an antiquary! Maybe he likes collecting souvenirs of the past.

SARI

Our past? The war? The looting, the burning, the killing afterward—?

DAVID

(Shrug)

People are peculiar. You'd be surprised what interests some of them. Besides, it's still a free country. In most ways.

SARI

Why didn't he know the year?

DAVID

Of course he knew the year. Raymond misunderstood.

SARI

Androids do not make mistakes.

DAVID

Nonsense. Despite the claims of those chemical factories that slop them together out of plastic and God knows what else, androids are still only artificial human beings, designed to handle the limited functions of menial jobs. They're mass produced—and that means they're subject to a hell of a lot of production errors.

SARI

Raymond said very distinctly that Deem acted surprised and pleased to learn that it was 1997.

DAVID

I don't believe it.

SARI

What?

DAVID

I doubt that Raymond said anything at all.

SARI

You don't think it happened?

DAVID

I know YOU think so. That's why I'm concerned.

SARI

(Rushing to console)

Call the market! Ask Raymond . . .

DAVID

(Grabbing her hand)

Get hold of yourself, Sari! The market's closed.

SARI

(Staring at him in horror)

How can I prove it to you?

DAVID

Prove that there's something wrong about Deem? You can't.

Stranger with Roses

SARI

The way you're staring—you really think—

DAVID

I'm afraid I do.

SARI

I am NOT breaking down again, David. I tell you, I am not—

(Two soft chimes. SARI goes rigid)

DAVID

He wants in. Unlock the door.

(SARI shakes her head)

DAVID

(A warning)

Sari—

SARI

I don't care, I'm not going to let him in.

(Angrily, he thrusts her aside. She tries to prevent him from pushing the appropriate button)

SARI

Don't, David, please—don't. That man is—ALIEN.

DAVID

Will you in the name of God STOP IT?

(Silence after the shout. Stung, she draws back. He presses the button. In a moment, DEEM enters R. He wears a jacket and some type of throat scarf. He immediately senses trouble in the room)

DEEM

Am I interrupting—?

DAVID

(Forced smile)

Only a family discussion. Finances.

DEEM

(Relieved)

Ah, I see.

(SARI turns her back, facing upstage. DEEM moves to the sofa)

DEEM

It certainly is a pleasant evening, even though it's still rather warm. It looks like me might have rain tomorrow.

(No response from the others)

DEEM

You know, I didn't realize this was such a large city. At night you can see all the towers. They glow like fire. They light up the whole horizon.

DAVID

Care for a drink, Deem?

DEEM

No thank you, Mr. Childs. I'm not a drinking man. (Settles on the sofa with a contented sigh) Besides, that dinner was quite sufficient to produce a feeling of well being. Your wife is a superb cook.

SARI

(Turning on him)

The automatic food center did the cooking.

DEEM

Food center? . . . Ah, certainly. But the meal had such a natural taste—

(SARI looks at DAVID, as if to point up the significance of DEEM's hesitation. DAVID, pacing restlessly, ignores her)

DAVID

I don't believe you told us your line of work, Deem.

DEEM

No, I don't think I did.

(DEEM stares at DAVID)

DAVID

(Mildly sarcastic)

Shall we guess?

Stranger with Roses

DEEM

Not necessary. It's insurance.

DAVID

A profitable business. You did come here from somewhere else, right?

DEEM

Yes. A smaller city.

DAVID

Back east?

DEEM

No, only a few hundred miles away. In a neighboring state.

DAVID

Were you in the insurance field there?

DEEM

I was.

DAVID

Do you plan to keep on with that same business here?

DEEM

If I can find a position. In that other city, I operated my own brokerage agency. Of course I can't do that here. Being a newcomer, I have no regular customers. So I hope to find a spot with an established agency. In fact, tomorrow morning, I intend to start making the rounds. In a year or so, when I've developed a clientele of my own, perhaps I can open an agency again.

DAVID

You're planning to stay here, then?

DEEM

As long as possible. Permanently, I hope.

DAVID

What would prevent it?

DEEM

Why—poor insurance business. (DAVID nods) Mr.

Childs, do you know anything about the local insurance laws? I was wondering whether they were different . . .

SARI

Different from what?

DEEM

From those of the state I came from, Mrs. Childs. The laws often vary quite a bit, state to state.

SARI

(Barely audible)

Oh.

DAVID

I'm afraid I can't help you, Deem. Especially since I don't know where you lived before.

DEEM

I understand.

(There is a prolonged pause. DEEM sees them both staring. Suddenly tension drains out of him)

DEEM

You must forgive me for being overly reticent. I admit it's deliberate. I have tried to—to wipe out my past. In that other city, which I prefer not to name, I had some trouble.

DAVID

(Quietly alert)

What kind?

DEEM

Over a woman. I won't bore you with it.

SARI

No, tell us.

DAVID

(Feeling DEEM has explained himself)

He needn't, Sari. Not unless it would make you feel more at ease, Deem.

Stranger with Roses

DEEM

Yes. Yes, it might. I've only been here a short time. Less than a day. But you've both been exceptionally kind. Since I hope to be staying with you for quite a while, I would like to explain.

DAVID

(Another "See?" look at SARI)

Go right ahead.

DEEM

Thank you. (Beat) I'm not by nature a secretive person. And a man does have to talk with someone, after all.

(DEEM stands, moves DC, looking out over the audience as he speaks in a kind of reverie)

DEEM

I'm afraid there's nothing unique or original in the story. A woman worked in my office. A fine woman. I loved her very much. And she loved me. But she was married—and I had been a bachelor all my life. She had a small child. A little girl. She felt she had a duty to her child, and to her husband. In spite of the deep affection between us, there was simply no solution to the problem. Nothing to be done but . . . endure. Unfortunately, her husband found out. We . . . had words. The woman couldn't see me again. All in all, it came to a messy end. I felt it would be best to sell the agency and leave the city. . . . It was very unpleasant.

DAVID

So you came here to make a fresh start. Leaving the woman with her child and her husband.

DEEM

That's it, exactly.

DAVID

I can certainly understand that, can't you, Sari?

SARI

What? (Unconvinced) Oh, yes.

DAVID

Deem, did you drop down to the market today?

DEEM

(Alert)

Why do you ask?

DAVID

Well, Sari maintains that she got a call from the android shopper that handles our account.

DEEM

A call concerning me?

DAVID

Raymond—the android—said you wanted to change some large bills.

DEEM

That's true. I needed to pay your wife. (Sharp glance at SARI) I did.

DAVID

Raymond also said—well, frankly, it struck me as idiotic, but you know how unreliable androids can be . . .

SARI

Perhaps he doesn't.

(Another sharp look from DEEM. SARI turns away)

DEEM

What did the android say, Mrs. Childs? (She doesn't answer) Mrs. Childs?

DAVID

That you asked what year it was.

DEEM

How absurd.

DAVID

Then you didn't?

DEEM

Mr. Childs, do I seem to be in possession of my senses?

Stranger with Roses

DAVID

(Smile)

I'd say so.

DEEM

There is your answer. I asked no such foolish question.

DAVID

(To SARI)

I told you the android heard wrong. Better call the market manager tomorrow and tell him that Raymond needs to go back to the factory for inspection.

DEEM

(A yawn)

If you'll both excuse me, it's been a tiring day. I want to be out early tomorrow.

DAVID

Good night, Deem. And if I miss you in the morning, good luck. I hope you find a job, and that everything works out for you.

DEEM

I am here, Mr. Childs. In a comfortable room in a pleasant house. So as to things working out—they already have. (Starts out, nods politely to SARI) Mrs. Childs.

(SARI barely nods in return. DEEM exits DL)

SARI

David . . .

DAVID

I won't hear one word.

(She rushes DL, to be sure DEEM is out of earshot, then wheels back)

SARI

(With quiet savagery)

Raymond—does—not—make—mistakes.

DAVID

You're convincing me that YOU do.

SARI

Did you notice the way Deem looked at me when you told him what Raymond said?

DAVID

Why shouldn't he look at you? With that accusation, you as much as called him a lunatic.

SARI

But you think I'm the lunatic.

DAVID

I think that unless you're careful, you're heading for another complete breakdown. Sari, you're not trying! The doctor warned you not to let your imagination breed those formless fears again.

SARI -

There is something WRONG about that man.

DAVID

It's certainly not his secret, scarlet past. Which is neither secret nor very scarlet. To me he seems ordinary. Harmless. And a bit sad.

SARI

I'll prove it to you—

DAVID

Now!

SARI

I will. I'll find a way . . .

DAVID

If you pursue this, Sari, I promise you—with your consent or otherwise—I'll contact the doctor. Frankly, going through the first ordeal with you was taxing enough. I won't put up with a whole host of new, neurotic suspicions—

SARI

Neurotic suspicions! You're cruel to say—

DAVID

Stop it! Now! (Beat) God. I want a drink.

Stranger with Roses

(He starts out L, suddenly turns back)

DAVID

I mean it, Sari. I don't want to hear one more damn word about Mr. Deem.

(He exits. SARI stands with hands formed into fists, tears starting in her eyes)

SARI

Neurotic suspicions—? You didn't talk to Raymond. Raymond sounded perfectly normal. I'll prove it to you, David. I'll prove it to you somehow. I saw the way Deem looked at me. I saw it. You didn't. For a moment, he—hated me. (Suddenly begins rubbing her arms) David, I'm afraid. I'm so cold. Is it happening again? Won't you answer me, David? Is it happening again—?

DIMOUT

SCENE 5

(In the darkness, we hear SARI's low, short scream. Lights snap on. Even though it is morning, the backdrop is dimly lit. There is a rumble of thunder, and thunder is heard intermittently throughout the rest of the play. Disheveled, SARI appears DL, her fingers holding her place in a thick reference book. She stumbles to the console, puts the book down—open to her place—punches buttons frantically. Two soft chimes)

SARI

(To screen)

Mr. Childs. In the Claims Adjustment Department. Please hurry!

(Single chime. SARI closes her eyes)

SARI

Oh God. Oh my God—

(DAVID appears against the backdrop Up Left Center. Lighting frames his head and shoulders)

DAVID

Childs here. I—Sari!

SARI

David, I'm sorry to bother you—

DAVID

I should hope so. I'm swamped with work.

SARI

In Deem's room, I saw—

DAVID

Sari, I want you to call the doctor.

SARI

Please listen.

DAVID

No, I warned you last night. Call the doctor.

SARI

I won't.

DAVID

Then I will.

SARI

You won't believe there's something wrong about Deem, but I saw the proof. In his suitcase! I saw—

(She can't continue)

DAVID

(Harsh)

Explain to me why you snooped in Deem's room.

SARI

I didn't snoop. At least, not to begin with. I went in to tidy up. He pays for that, you know. I couldn't help looking around. You wouldn't believe me—you think I'm breaking down again . . .

DAVID

You're certainly acting like it.

Stranger with Roses

SARI

That's because I saw what he has in his suitcase.

DAVID

For God's sake be coherent! If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, get off so I can call the doctor.

SARI

I went to his room after he left this morning. I polished the clothes chest and—looked inside.

DAVID

And?

SARI

Shirts, handkerchiefs, socks—all the things look so OLD . . .

DAVID

Get to the point. His suitcase. What about that?

SARI

I saw it sticking out from under the bed. At first I didn't want to open it—

DAVID

But you did.

SARI

Yes.

DAVID

Wasn't it locked?

SARI

It was locked. But it's old. The locks are very cheap. I went to our bedroom for a nail file, and pried at the locks, and they came open . . .

DAVID

(Despair)

A nail file. Oh my God, Sari, you're—

SARI

I only opened the suitcase because there were strange sounds when I shook it. Something heavy inside, bumping. Something lighter, making a rustling sound. Rust-

ling . . . David, no flowers have grown anywhere since the war.

DAVID

Not since the bombings of 1980, that's true.

SARI

And personal weapons haven't been permitted.

DAVID

If you mean hand guns—

SARI

Yes, hand guns. After the war riots, private ownership of hand guns was made illegal, wasn't it?

DAVID

Yes, but I don't see—

SARI

Except for police weapons, hand guns are virtually nonexistent!

DAVID

Even the police don't use them much any more. But I fail to see what all this has to do with—

SARI

I wasn't positive about the guns. So I looked it up. (Holds book in front of console screen) Here, in the Historical Encyclopedia. There are pictures—David, the gun is exactly like the one shown in this plate! A model from BEFORE the war. From BEFORE 1980.

DAVID

What gun?

SARI

The gun in Deem's suitcase!

DAVID

You're joking.

SARI

I saw it. I touched it! He has a gun and . . . two flowers.

DAVID

Artificial?

Stranger with Roses

SARI

Real ones. Roses. Two wilted red roses. The flowers DIED back in '80. Even wilted ones don't last seventeen years.

DAVID

Sari, answer me. Have you taken any medication this morning?

SARI

I am not hallucinating! I am frightened to death but every word is true. If you won't believe me about Raymond, will you believe your own eyes?

(A rumble of thunder)

DAVID

(After a pause)

Is Deem still out?

SARI

Yes.

DAVID

I don't understand any of this. But I'm coming home. I have about five minutes' urgent work to finish up—two calls. Then I'll drive to the house as fast as I can. I want to see those things.

SARI

They're real, I swear.

DAVID

If they are, I've done you a terrible injustice.

SARI

That doesn't matter.

DAVID

And the authorities need to know about Mr. Deem.

SARI

Yes, yes, they do. Hurry, David.

DAVID

I intend to.

(Area lighting fades out on DAVID. SARI puts

the book back on the console, still open. She paces, chewing her knuckles. She starts out Down L, pulls back, obviously frightened. A double chime shatters the silence. SARI starts, rushes to the console, presses a button. Lights come up on the porch platform to reveal DEEM. The lighting is dim, to suggest stormy conditions outside. SARI sees him on the console screen, recoils)

DEEM

Will you unlock the door please, Mrs. Childs?

(No answer from SARI)

DEEM

Mrs. Childs, it's going to rain. Will you please unlock the door?

(She hesitates, then reluctantly presses a button on the console. DEEM leaves platform, exits Up R, as lights on platform fade out. SARI stands staring, suddenly notices the open book. She moves quickly to close it, doesn't quite reach it as DEEM appears abruptly DR)

DEEM

I'm back much earlier than I anticipated. Surprisingly good luck, too, despite the gloomy weather. I think I've located a position. I must return tomorrow, to speak with the manager of the insurance agency. By the way, I really should have a front door key. It's inconvenient to ring every time I—Mrs. Childs, what is it?

SARI

Nothing.

DEEM

Why are you staring at me?

SARI

No reason. That is, I wasn't staring—

DEEM

Indeed you were, Mrs. Childs. In fact, ever since I ar-

Stranger with Roses

rived, your behavior has been decidedly odd. You must tell me why you don't like me.

(He starts walking toward her. He brushes the book lying on the console, sees instantly what she's been reading. But he toys with her:)

DEEM

Doing a little reading?

SARI

(Extending her hand for book)

Nothing important.

DEEM

(Pushing her back)

Let's see what topic drew your interest in— (Glances at book's spine) The Historical Encyclopedia. (Studies the open page) Fire arms. Hand guns. (He looks at her, his polite mask stripped away) You're making a study of hand guns, Mrs. Childs?

SARI

(Screaming)

Like the one you have in your suitcase!

DEEM

I see. (Puts book on console, closes it. Quietly:) May I ask what is so unusual about a man owning a gun?

SARI

Guns were banned after the war. The war in 1980! And the bombs killed the flowers. All of them. (Beat) Or don't you know that?

DEEM

(Touching artificial flowers on console)

Perhaps I do. Then again, perhaps I don't.

SARI

Who are you? WHAT are you . . .

DEEM

The question is, what are you, Mrs. Childs? And the un-

fortunate answer is—a busybody. (Seizes her wrist) A sneak!

(Enraged, he releases her by flinging her hand away)

SARI

(Unsteadily)

Pack your things. Get out of here.

DEEM

I'm afraid I can't do that. Not since you've seen the gun. And the flowers. (Sigh) I feared something like this might happen. But I couldn't bring myself to throw the gun away—or the flowers. And I didn't know where to hide them. As I told your husband last night, I am not by nature a secretive man. I am not a man of guile or venom. (Beat) Except when necessary.

SARI

How can you have roses? There haven't been any roses on earth for seventeen years!

DEEM

So you informed me.

SARI

Not since before the war!

DEEM

I know that now. (Beat) I come from that time, Mrs. Childs. The time of the guns. The time of the roses.

SARI

(Aghast)

From—?

DEEM

Before the war.

SARI

I'm losing my mind.

DEEM

No, Mrs. Childs, rest assured you are not. Because of

Stranger with Roses

your curiosity, however, you have lost your life. (Takes her hand) Come with me. Upstairs. I must get the gun.

SARI

David's coming home—

DEEM

From his office?

SARI

Any minute! I called him when I found the flowers.

DEEM

(Swift look DR)

He won't get in. The door's locked.

SARI

He has his own key.

DEEM

(Holding her wrist)

In that case, we must wait for his arrival—so I can do what must be done.

(SARI makes a feeble effort to pull away)

DEEM

Now please, Mrs. Childs. Struggling is useless. I'm not a strong man. But I'm stronger than you. (Cowed, she stands still) I am exceedingly sorry that you searched my room. I'm also sorry that you called Mr. Childs. He is a gentleman. I like him. I wish he could have been spared.

(With a low cry, SARI tries once more to pull back from him. A quick, vicious tug by DEEM crows her again. Rumble of thunder. Gently, holding SARI's wrist with one hand, DEEM puts his other arm around her shoulder and walks her slowly toward the exit DL)

DEEM

(Softly)

Upstairs, now, Mrs. Childs. Upstairs for the gun. Then we'll wait for your husband.

(They exit)

BLACKOUT

SCENE 6

(Lights fade up. The backdrop remains very dark. SARI is seated on the sofa, tensely watching the DR entrance. DEEM has turned the chair DL so that it directly faces DR. The gun is visible in his hand. Two wilted red roses are lying on the downstage corner of the communications console. SARI starts suddenly, as:)

DAVID

(Offstage)

Sari?

SARI

Be careful, David, don't come in here—!

(DAVID enters, putting a key case away)

DAVID

It's almost pitch dark outside. There's a real storm com—
(Sees gun) What in hell—?

DEEM

Steady, Mr. Childs. Stand right there.

DAVID

(Pointing at gun)

Is—is that—?

DEEM

A hand gun? Yes. In perfect operating order. And fully loaded. (Gestures) Sit down, please. Over there, beside your wife.

SARI

David, I'm sorry. I tried to warn you—

DAVID

And I wouldn't listen. Deem, if you've hurt her—

Stranger with Roses

DEEM

I said sit down.

(DAVID senses the man's cruel determination, starts toward the sofa. He passes the console, notices the roses. Awed, he reaches for them)

DEEM

Don't touch them!

(Alarmed by DEEM's tone, DAVID withdraws his hand. He goes to the sofa, sits down next to SARI. DEEM remains standing)

DEEM

That's better.

DAVID

What are you trying to do, Deem?

DEEM

Survive.

(He walks over to make sure the roses are unharmed, as:)

DAVID

But who are you? Some escaped lunatic?

DEEM

On the contrary. I am in full command of my faculties. Unfortunately, in order to save myself, I must perform the act of a lunatic.

SARI

He says he's going to kill us.

DEEM

I must. I'd hoped I could be comfortable here, Mr. Childs. Safe at last. Your wife's snooping made that impossible. I trust you realize that she has brought this tragic outcome down on both your heads.

DAVID

(Straining forward)

Talk sense, Deem! There's no reason for you to kill us. We're not your enemies.

DEEM

But you are. (Gently, he picks up one of the roses) Now that you know about me.

DAVID

I don't know a thing about you. Neither of us knows a thing. We won't say a word.

DEEM

Until I'm out the front door. Sorry, Mr. Childs. No go.

DAVID

You ARE sick.

DEEM

Sit back. I said BACK.

(DAVID does, reluctantly)

DEEM

That's it. (Beat) As to the question of sickness, I am neither more nor less sick than this world we inhabit. If the world is sick, so am I. A good case might be made for that, I'll admit.

DAVID

Where do you come from?

DEEM

Didn't your wife tell you?

DAVID

Only hints. The flowers. A private hand gun—

SARI

And old clothes. Asking the date—

DEEM

I come from the year 1979.

DAVID

Eighteen years ago? That's impossible.

SARI

But the roses have to come from before the war.

DEEM

Which began in 1980. She is quite correct, Mr. Childs.

Stranger with Roses

DAVID

How, Deem? How?

DEEM

When I returned unexpectedly this morning, to find that Mrs. Childs had rifled my personal belongings, she had a book . . .

SARI

The Historical Encyclopedia.

DEEM

Yes. Perhaps if you look up the appropriate article, you'll find reference to a device called a warp phase effector. It was developed and built in the year 1977 by scientists at the Los Oros Institute, under the direction of a brilliant theoretician named Dr. Viborg Stockhausen.

DAVID

Warp phase effector? Talk English!

DEEM

A device for travelling in time.

DAVID

That's absurd.

DEEM

No, sir, it is not. The time travel device was built at enormous expense. One of a kind. But it did exist. Whether it exists now, I can't say.

DAVID

The Institute is still in operation. Up in the desert, near the mountains. About a hundred miles from here. As I recall, bands of looters burned it during the riots. It was rebuilt, but on a much smaller scale than before. I've never heard of a time travel device.

DEEM

In the late seventies, it was a classified project. Basic research for the government. From what you tell me, I assume the device was destroyed. Construction of another was probably too costly— (Suddenly annoyed by

their blank stares) See here, it's quite simple! Before the war, I worked at the Los Oros Institute.

SARI

Worked there? You?

DEEM

I was, in fact, the head gardener. In complete charge of the grounds.

DAVID

Then all that talk about the insurance business---just lies?

DEEM

Necessary lies.

SARI

So you didn't find a job this morning.

DEEM

Yes, I did. (Beat) Manual labor. That's why it took so little time.

DAVID

You mean to tell us you travelled from 1979 to right now ---to 1997---eighteen years BEYOND the time in which you lived?

DEEM

Correct.

DAVID

Why?

DEEM

Why did I come to this house? Chance. I wanted a quiet hideaway. Sanctuary. Now I shall have to kill you and move on. Find another place. A safer place. I entered the time device a little less than two years after it was finished. They---the people back there---might risk sending someone after me. So I dare leave no trail.

DAVID

But why this particular year? Did you know you were going to end up in 1997?

DEEM

Not exactly. Dr. Stockhausen and I were good friends, you see. I helped him with his rose garden at home. In return, when I pretended to have a great interest in his device, he showed me how it operated. Perhaps it was more than pretense on my part. Looking back, I think I wheedled Stockhausen into all those explanations because, somehow, I knew the situation was hopeless—and that I might need to understand how the device worked. It was really quite easy to program. Simplicity was what made it so expensive! A half dozen controls—a large bell chamber into which you stepped—even I, a self educated man, could get the hang of it quickly. Despite that simplicity, Stockhausen was always warning me of the theoretical dangers. “Beware the paradoxes,” he’d say. “Beware the paradoxes—”

DAVID

I don’t get you.

DEEM

Suppose I went forward in time ten years—to the house where I lived—and I knocked on the door—and the man who opened the door had my face—only he was ten years older—which would be me? Both?

DAVID

Why, it would be . . .

(Stops suddenly, scowling)

DEEM

(Cynical smile)

You see? Actually, though, I didn’t care about any of that. I just wanted to learn how to set the device to carry me well into the future. To answer your original question—no, when I came here, I was not sure whether I’d arrive in 1996, or seven, or eight—but any of those years would have been suitable.

SARI

So you lied about everything!

DEEM

About everything but the woman.

DAVID

There WAS trouble?

DEEM

(Nods)

She worked at the Institute. In one of the laboratories. (Sadly) She was beautiful. And the only woman who ever saw anything in me to love. She'd watch my hands on the flowers at the Institute. She said I touched the flowers like—God touching His children. She loved all my flowers, but especially my red roses. Her daughter loved them too—

(A pause. DEEM's face grows stark)

DEEM

I despised the child's father—the swine the woman married. I wanted to marry her myself, desperately. She insisted that she had to stay with him—she had a duty to him—to her daughter. Would he have done the same? No! He chased other women. He drank—Christ, how I hated him! (Beat. He calms a little) But she wouldn't divorce him. I pleaded. I promised to care for her. For the child, too. She refused. She had to go back to him.

(Another pause. Now, at last, DEEM's madness shines through:)

DEEM

That was something I could not permit.

SARI

You had nothing to say about it.

DEEM

But I did. I was the only one who could put matters right. She wouldn't free herself, she wouldn't free her daughter—and I couldn't allow HIM to claim them. (Beat) One night when the moonlight came down white on the mountains behind the Institute—white on the flowers I tended so carefully in the middle of that cruel

Stranger with Roses

desert—I wanted to give the people who worked there just a touch of beauty, you see—a sweet fragrance—a splash of color in the midst of a wasteland . . . One night, I say, she worked late. I had pleaded with her again the day before. I had begged her. No use. She hadn't the courage to break with him and love me openly. I was sorry for her. Such a great pity I felt. So I freed her.

DAVID

Freed her? How?

DEEM

It was chilly that night. I was wearing my black overcoat. The desert grows quite cold after sundown, you know.

DAVID

(Pushing)

How did you free her, Deem?

DEEM

Everyone else had gone home by the time she left the laboratory building. Her husband arrived to pick her up. He drove through the main gate, some mile and a quarter from the lab, and parked outside the building. I could hear him complaining. Yelling at the little girl who had come along in the car. It gives you some idea of the kind of man he was—keeping a small child up that late, then berating her for being cross. I was watching from the shadows beside the building. I had a gun. A gun I bought after I made up my mind that only I could set matters right. This gun . . . As she bent to enter the car, I stepped forward and called her name. I remember seeing their faces, the three of them, white in the moonlight. I raised the gun. The moon made the barrel glow like a fiery sword. A righteous sword. An avenging sword . . .

SARI

You—killed him?

DEEM

Yes. Then I killed her. Then I killed the child.

(Hand to her mouth, SARI turns aside)

DEEM

(Sigh)

Eighteen years ago. And yet—for me—it's only been a few days. (Shakes his head) Later that night, I cut roses. A dozen roses. I laid nine beside the bodies. Three for each. I kept three for myself but—somewhere along the way, I lost one. She loved roses, you know.

(Now DAVID is standing. He takes a step toward DEEM)

DAVID

Deem—

DEEM

Stay there.

DAVID

Let us find help for you.

DEEM

No.

DAVID

Someone—professional . . .

DEEM

A mental doctor, you mean? Why? I am in perfect control. I was in perfect control the night I left.

DAVID

But you PLANNED to kill her—

DEEM

There was no other way! I knew I stood very little chance of being discovered. As I mentioned, the laboratory was situated quite far from the main gate. And the night guard on duty at the gatehouse was the laughingstock of the Institute. An old man, near retirement. Hard of hearing! I had my bag already packed.

Stranger with Roses

SARI

To murder a child—!

DEEM

Be quiet! You can't understand because you're a woman. Women don't have the strength—the courage—to set matters right.

SARI

That's true. That takes a man who's crazy.

DEEM

Mrs. Childs, I just made a decision. (Raises gun) You will be first.

DAVID

(To distract him)

Wait, Deem. Tell me the rest. About using the time travel device—did you use it that same night?

DEEM

I did. Dr. Stockhausen had shown me how. Of course, till then, only short trips had been made. A few hours into the past. Half an hour into the future. I set the mechanism ahead. Just as the sun was rising, I entered the bell chamber. When the few moments of semi-consciousness passed, I found myself all alone in the desert. The device moved a person through space as well as time, you see, and evidently I'd set the space controls so that I arrived some distance from the Institute. It was nowhere in sight. I walked to a highway, got a ride, and came here. To this city. This house. Where now, regrettably, I must kill—

(A soft chime. All eyes whip toward the console. DAVID starts toward it)

DEEM

(Threatening him back with gun)

Don't answer!

(DAVID stands tensely. Two more chimes)

DEEM

No one move. Whoever it is will go away.

DAVID

If they don't?

DEEM

They will. Wait.

(After a moment, two chimes)

SARI

We have to answer!

DAVID

She's right.

(Two more chimes)

DEEM

Who the hell can it be? So insistent—

(Two more chimes)

DEEM

All right! Answer it, Mrs. Childs. (Gestures with gun)
But be careful of what you say. Extremely careful.

(Numbly, SARI goes to console, pushes button. Lights up on the porch platform, just enough so that we can barely make out the middle-aged STOCKHAUSEN standing there, anxiously eyeing the sky. Thunder rumbles)

SARI

Yes?

STOCKHAUSEN

(Starting)

Hello? Who is speaking?

SARI

I'm inside the house. You're standing in front of the security camera.

DEEM

(Looking at console)

Stockhausen!

Stranger with Roses

DAVID

The scientist?

STOCKHAUSEN

(Nervous)

Oh—well—I wish to see Vincent Deem.

(SARI looks at DEEM, terrified. He shakes his head, violently. As scene progresses, DAVID tenses, makes a series of small moves, positioning himself to attack DEEM)

SARI

(To console)

There's no one here by that name.

STOCKHAUSEN

I know otherwise. Let me speak to him. Better yet, let me in. It's beginning to rain.

SARI

You're mistaken, there's no one—

STOCKHAUSEN

Young woman, I followed him here. Using the warp phase effector. I have searched the city for him. A clerk at a nearby market told me he was staying with you. Kindly tell me how to find your front door.

SARI

Please, leave us alone. We don't know any Deem—

STOCKHAUSEN

And I tell you I know he is in there!

(DEEM shoves SARI out of the way. He is no longer in control of himself)

DEEM

Go away, Viborg. Let me live in peace.

STOCKHAUSEN

You must come back with me, Vincent.

DEEM

No!

STOCKHAUSEN

Back to '79. To stand trial.

DEEM

You can't force me. I'm here—this is my home now—

STOCKHAUSEN

This is not your home, Vincent. You don't belong here, you're a stranger here, you never stayed here.

(DAVID is behind DEEM, almost ready, signalling SARI with glances to stay out of the way)

DEEM

Liar. LIAR!

STOCKHAUSEN

On the contrary, Vincent. (Taking out a piece of paper) I have evidence that you returned to your own time. So you must come with me—

DEEM

I won't.

STOCKHAUSEN

But you have no choice! This evidence establishes—

DEEM

No, no, I'm HERE!

STOCKHAUSEN

Let me come in, Vincent. (Extending paper) Once you see this—

DEEM

Filthy, conniving liar! (Points gun at console) Get away! Get away from this house—!

(DAVID lunges. DEEM gives a wild yell. They struggle. Throughout following action, STOCKHAUSEN keeps yelling, "What's going on in there? Open up!" etc. DAVID and DEEM fight for possession of the gun. The two roses are knocked to the floor during the fight. At the end, DAVID has his hands locked on DEEM's

Stranger with Roses

wrist, down L. DEEM's back is to the audience. A muffled shot. DEEM stiffens. DAVID jumps back. The gun falls. DEEM stumbles to the chair DL, mortally hit. He collapses into the chair, pushing at his midsection with one hand. Suddenly he starts up)

DEEM

It's so dark. I can't see the roses. WHERE ARE THE ROSES—?

(He slumps, dead, his face turned away from the audience)

DAVID

(Barely a whisper)

My God. My God.

STOCKHAUSEN

(Still outside)

What's happening in there? Someone please answer!

DAVID

Better let him in . . .

(SARI goes to the console, presses a button. STOCKHAUSEN hurries off stage R)

SARI

He—nearly killed you.

DAVID

The gun just—went off.

SARI

David, is he . . . ?

(David makes a quick inspection, nods bleakly. A moment of silence as this sinks in. Then, slowly, SARI forces herself to look toward DEEM's body)

SARI

Such a sick, tortured man. Friendless. Alone . . .

DAVID

If we can believe what he said, a—stranger to every-

thing around him. With nothing to hold onto except that gun.

SARI

(Slowly bending to pick up the two fallen flowers)

And the roses . . .

(STOCKHAUSEN enters DR, hurriedly)

STOCKHAUSEN

It's so gloomy outside, I couldn't find your door— (Sees DEEM) Oh, God. Vincent. (Rushes forward to kneel by DEEM's body. Touches it. Rises, slowly) How did this happen?

DAVID

Accident. You can hear about it when I explain to the authorities.

STOCKHAUSEN

But he can't be shot! He returned to 1979, with me—

SARI

What did you say?

STOCKHAUSEN

(Showing the piece of paper)

I told him I had proof. I checked the municipal records shortly after arriving in this city. The records show that late in the year 1979, Vincent Deem was tried for murder, convicted, and placed in a public mental institution which survived a war mentioned in those same records.

(DAVID and SARI stand dumbfounded)

STOCKHAUSEN

(Flourishing paper)

Here—is—the—evidence! A photocopy from the record office of this very city. (Stabbing finger at paper as he shows it to DAVID) Vincent Deem died in a public madhouse. There is the certification of his death, of coronary failure, in the year 1983. Therefore—I returned him to the past. ALIVE.

Stranger with Roses

DAVID

(Looking from paper to DEEM)

Did you?

STOCKHAUSEN

(Snatching paper back)

It says so right here!

SARI

I don't understand, David. How could Deem go back with this man and die—and still be . . . (Pointing at DEEM's body) . . . there? It's impossible!

DAVID

"Beware the paradoxes—"

STOCKHAUSEN

(With a start)

What's that?

DAVID

Your words, aren't they? Deem said they were. So tell me, Doctor. When did Vincent Deem really die? Or are there—were there—two Vincent Deems? (He takes the two roses from SARI's hand) Both somehow created by your machine? Both dead? (Long pause) Answer me, Doctor. (Pause. DAVID thrusts the roses at STOCKHAUSEN) Answer me!

SLOW CURTAIN

Fortune Hunter

POUL ANDERSON

After cleaning up indoors, I stepped outside for a look at the evening. I'd only moved here a few days ago. Before, I'd been down in the woods. Now I was above timberline, and there'd just been time to make my body at home—reassemble the cabin and its furnishings, explore the area, deploy the pickups, let lungs acquire a taste for thinner air. My soul was still busy settling in.

I missed sun-flecks spattered like gold on soft shadow-brown duff, male ruggedness and woman-sweet odor of pines and their green that speared into heaven, a brook that glittered and sang, bird calls, a splendidly antlered wapiti who'd become my friend and took food from my hand. (He was especially fond of cucumber peels. I dubbed him Charlie.) You don't live six months in a place, from the blaze of autumn through the iron and white of winter, being reborn with the land when spring breathes over it—you don't do this and not keep some of that place ever afterward inside your bones.

Nevertheless, I'd kept remembering high country, and when Jo Modzeleski said she'd failed to get my time extended further, I decided to go up for what remained of it. That was part of my plan; she loved the whole wilderness as much as I did, but she kept her heart on its peaks and they ought to help make her mood right. However, I myself was happy to return.

And as I walked out of the cabin, past my skeletal

flitter, so that nothing human-made was between me and the world, suddenly the whole of me was again altogether belonging where I was.

This base stood on an alpine meadow. Grass grew thick and moist, springy underfoot, daisy-starred. Here and there bulked boulders the size of houses, grayness scored by a glacier which had once gouged out the little lake rippling and sparkling not far away: a sign to me that I also was included in eternity. Everywhere around, the Wind River Mountains lifted snow crowns and the darker blues of their rock, into a dizzyingly tall heaven where an eagle hovered. He caught on his wings the sunlight which slanted out of the west. Those beams seemed to fill the chilliness, turning it somehow molten; and the heights were alive with shadows.

I smelled growth, more austere than in the forest but not the less strong. A fish leaped, I saw the brief gleam and an instant later, very faintly through quietness, heard the water clink. Though there was no real breeze, my face felt the air kiss it.

I buttoned my mackinaw, reached for smoking gear, and peered about. A couple of times already, I'd spied a bear. I knew better than to try a Charlie-type relationship with such a beast, but surely we could share the territory amicably, and if I could learn enough of his ways to plant pickups where they could record his life—or hers, in which case she'd be having cubs—

No. You're bound back to civilization at the end of this week. Remember?

Oh, but I may be returning.

As if in answer to my thought, I heard a whirr aloft. It grew, till another flitter hove into sight. Jo was taking me up on my invitation at an earlier hour than I'd expected when I said, "Come for dinner about sundown." Earlier than I'd hoped? My heart knocked. I stuck pipe and tobacco pouch back in my pockets and walked fast to greet her.

She landed and sprang out of the bubble before the airpad motors were silent. She always had been quick and graceful on her feet. Otherwise she wasn't much to look at: short, stocky, pug nose, pale round eyes under close-cropped black hair. For this occasion she'd left off the ranger's uniform in favor of an iridescent clingsuit; but it couldn't have done a lot for her even if she had known how to wear it.

"Welcome," I said, took both her hands and gave her my biggest smile.

"Hi." She sounded breathless. Color came and went across her cheeks. "How are you?"

"Okay. Sad at leaving, naturally." I turned the smile wry, so as not to seem self-pitiful.

She glanced away. "You'll be going back to your wife, though."

Don't push too hard. "You're ahead of yourself, Jo. I meant to have drinks and snacks ready in advance. Now you'll have to come in and watch me work."

"I'll help."

"Never, when you're my guest. Sit down, relax." I took her arm and guided her toward the cabin.

She uttered an uncertain laugh. "Are you afraid I'll get in your way, Pete? No worries. I know these knockdown units—I'd better, after three years—"

I was here for four, and that followed half a dozen years in and out of other wildernesses, before I decided that this was the one I wanted to record in depth, it being for me the loveliest of the lovely.

"—and they only have one practical place to stow any given kind of thing," she was saying. Then she stopped, which made me do likewise, turned her head from side to side, drank deep of air and sun-glow. "Please, don't let me hurry you. This is such a beautiful evening. You were out to enjoy it."

Unspoken: And you haven't many left, Pete. The documentation project ended officially last year. You're the

last of the very few mediamen who got special permission to stay on and finish their sequences; and now, no more stalling, no more extra time, the word is Everybody Out.

My unspoken reply: Except you rangers. A handful of you, holding degrees in ecology and soil biotics and whatnot—a handful who won in competition against a horde—does that give you the right to lord it over all this?

“Well, yes,” I said, and sequed to: “I’ll enjoy it especially in present company.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” She failed to sound cheery.

I squeezed her arm. “You know, I am going to miss you, Jo. Miss you like hell.” This past year, as my plan grew within me, I’d been cultivating her. Not just card games and long conversations over the sensiphone; no in-the-flesh get-togethers for hikes, rambles, picnics, fishing, birdwatching, deerwatching, starwatching. A mediaman gets good at the cultivation of people, and although this past decade had given me scant need to use that skill, it hadn’t died. As easy as breathing, I could show interest in her rather banal remarks, her rather sappy-sentimental opinions. . . . “Come see me when you get a vacation.”

“Oh, I’ll—I’ll call you up . . . now and then . . . if Marie won’t . . . mind.”

“I mean come in person. Holographic image, stereo sound, even scent and temperature and every other kind of circuit a person might pay for the use of—a phone isn’t the same as having a friend right there.”

She winced. “You’ll be in the city.”

“It isn’t so bad,” I said in my bravest style. “Pretty fair-sized apartment, a lot bigger than that plastic shack yonder. Soundproofed. Filtered and conditioned air. The whole conurb fully screened and policed. Armored vehicles available when you sally forth.”

"And a mask for my nose and mouth!" She nearly gagged.

"No, no, that hasn't been needed for a long while. They've gotten the dust, monoxide, and carcinogens down to a level, at least in my city, which—"

"The stinks. The tastes. No, Pete, I'm sorry, I'm no delicate flower but the visits to Boswash I make in line of duty are the limit of what I can take . . . after getting to know this land."

"I'm thinking of moving into the country myself," I said. "Rent a cottage in an agrarea, do most of my business by phone, no need to go downtown except when I get an assignment to document something there."

She grimaced. "I often think the agrareas are worse than any 'tropolis."

"Huh?" It surprised me that she could still surprise me.

"Oh, cleaner, quieter, less dangerous, residents not jammed elbow to elbow, true," she admitted. "But at least those snarling, grasping, frenetic city folk have a certain freedom, a certain . . . *life* to them. It may be the life of a ratpack, but it's real, it has a bit of structure and spontaneity and— In the hinterlands, not only nature is regimented. The people are."

Well, I don't know how else you could organize things to feed a world population of fifteen billion.

"All right," I said. "I understand. But this is a depressing subject. Let's saunter for a while. I've found some gentian blooming."

"So early in the season? Is it in walking distance? I'd like to see."

"Too far for now, I'm afraid. I've been tramping some mighty long days. However, let me show you the local blueberry patch. It should be well worth a visit, come late summer."

As I took her arm again, she said, in her awkward fashion, "You've become an expert, haven't you, Pete?"

"Hard to avoid that," I grunted. "Ten years, collecting sensie material on the Wilderness System."

"Ten years. . . . I was in high school when you began. I only knew the regular parks, where we stood in line on a paved path to see a redwood or a geyser, and we reserved swimming rights a month in advance. While you —" Her fingers closed around mine, hard and warm. "It doesn't seem fair to end your stay."

"Life never was fair."

Too damn much human life. Too little of any other kind. And we have to keep a few wildernesses a necessary reserve for what's left of the planet's ecology; a source of knowledge for researchers who're trying to learn enough about that ecology to shore it up before it collapses altogether; never mentioned, but present in every thinking head, the fact that if collapse does come, the wildernesses will be Earth's last seedbeds of hope.

"I mean," Jo plodded, "of course areas like this were being destroyed by crowds—loved to death, as somebody wrote—so the only thing to do was close them to everybody except a few caretakers and scientists, and that was politically impossible unless 'everybody' meant *everybody*." Ah, yes, she was back to her habit of thumbing smooth-worn cliches. "And after all, the sensie documentaries that artists like you have been making, they'll be available and—" The smoothness vanished. "You can't come back, Petel! Not ever again!"

Her fingers remembered where they were and let go of me. Mine followed them and squeezed, a measured gentleness. Meanwhile my pulse fluttered. It was as well that words didn't seem indicated at the moment, because my mouth was dry.

A mediaman should be more confident. But such a God damn lot was riding on this particular bet. I'd gotten Jo to care about me, not just in the benevolent way of her colleagues, isolated from mankind so they can

afford benevolence, but about me, this Pete-atom that wanted to spend the rest of its flickering days in the Wind River Mountains. Only how deeply did she care?

We walked around the lake. The sun dropped under the peaks—for minutes, the eastern snows were afire—and shadows welled up. I heard an owl hoot to his love. In royal blue, Venus kindled. The air sharpened, making blood run faster.

“Br-r-r!” Jo laughed. “Now I do want that drink.”

I couldn't see her features through the dusk. The first stars stood forth infinitely clear. But Jo was a blur, a warmth, a solidness, no more. She might almost have been Marie.

If she had been! Marie was beautiful and bright and sexy and— Sure, she took lovers while I was gone for months on end; we'd agreed that the reserves were my mistresses. She'd had no thought for them on my returns. . . . Oh, if only we could have shared it all!

Soon the sky would hold more stars than darkness, the Milky Way would be a white cataract, the lake would lie aglow with them, and when Jupiter rose there would be a perfect glade across the water. I'd stayed out half of last night to watch that.

Already the shining was such that we didn't need a penflash to find the entrance to my cabin. The insulation layer yielded under my touch. We stepped through, I zipped the door and closed the main switch, fluoros awoke as softly as the ventilation.

Jo was correct: those portables don't lend themselves to individuality. (She had a permanent cabin, built of wood and full of things dear to her.) Except for a few books and the like, my one room was strictly functional. True, the phone could bring me the illusion of almost anything or anybody, anywhere in the world, that I might want. We city folk learn to travel light. This interior was well-proportioned, pleasingly tinted, snug; a

step outside was that alpine meadow. What more did I need?

Out of hard-earned habit, I checked the nucleo gauge—ample power—before taking dinner from the freezer and setting it to cook. Thereafter I fetched nibblies, rum, and fruit juice, and mixed drinks the way Jo liked them. She didn't try to help after all, but settled back into the airchair. Neither of us had said much while we walked. I'd expected chatter out of her—a bit nervous, a bit too fast and blithe—once we were here. Instead, her stocky frame hunched in its mother-of-pearl suit that wasn't meant for it, and she stared at the hands in her lap.

No longer cold, I shucked my mackinaw and carried her drink over to her. "Revelry, not reverie!" I ordered. She took it. I clinked glasses. My other hand being then free, I reached thumb and forefinger to twitch her lips at the corners. "Hey, you, smile. This is supposed to be a jolly party."

"Is it?" The eyes she raised to me were afloat in tears.

"Sure, I hate to go—"

"Where's Marie's picture?"

That rocked me back. I hadn't expected so blunt a question. "Why, uh—" *Okay. Events are moving faster than you'd planned on, Peter. Move with them.* I took a swallow, squared my shoulders, and said manfully: "I didn't want to unload my troubles on you, Jo. The fact is, Marie and I have broken up. Nothing's left but the formalities."

"What?"

Her mouth is open, her look lost in mine; she spills some of her drink and doesn't notice— Have I really got it made? This soon?

I shrugged. "Yeah. The notice of intent to dissolve relationship arrived yesterday. I'd seen it coming, of course. She'd grown tired of waiting around."

"Oh, Petel!" She reached for me.

I was totally aware—walls, crowded shelves, night in a window, murmur and warm gusting from the heat unit, monitor lamp on the radionic oven and meat fragrances seeping out of it, this woman whom I must learn to desire—and thought quickly that at the present stage of things, I'd better pretend not to notice her gesture. "No sympathy cards," I said in a flat tone. "To be quite honest, I'm more relieved than otherwise."

"I thought—" she whispered. "I thought you two were happy."

Which we have been, my dear, Marie and I: though a sophisticated mediaman does suspect that considerable of our happiness, as opposed to contentment, has been due to my long absences this past decade. They've added spice. That's something you'll always lack, whatever happens, Jo. Yet a man can't live only on spices.

"It didn't last," I said as per plan. "She's found someone more compatible. I'm glad of that."

"You, Pete?"

"I'll manage. C'mon, drink your drink. I insist that we be merry."

She gulped. "I'll try."

After a minute: "You haven't even anyone to come home to!"

"'Home' doesn't mean a lot to a city man, Jo. One apartment is like another; and we move through a big total of 'em in a lifetime." The liquor must have touched me a bit, since I rushed matters: "Quite different from, say, these mountains. Each patch of them is absolutely unique. A man could spend all his years getting to know a single one, growing into it— Well."

I touched a switch and the airchair expanded, making room for me to settle down beside her. "Care for some background music?" I asked.

"No." Her gaze dropped—she had stubby lashes—and she blushed—blotchily—but she got her words out with a stubbornness I had come to admire. Somebody who

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had that kind of guts wouldn't be too bad a partner. "At least, I'd not hear it. This is just about my last chance to talk . . . really talk . . . to you, Pete. Isn't it?"

"I hope not." *More passion in that voice, boy.* "Lord, I hope not!"

"We have had awfully good times together. My colleagues are fine, you know, but—" She blinked hard. "You've been special."

"Same as you to me."

She was shivering a bit, meeting my eyes now, lips a bare few centimeters away. Since she seldom drank alcohol, I guessed that what I'd more or less forced on her had gotten a good strong hold, under these circumstances. *Remember, she's no urbanite who'll hop into bed and scarcely remember it two days later. She went directly from a small town to a tough university to here, and may actually be a virgin. However, you've worked toward this moment for months, Pete, old chum. Get started!*

It was the gentlest kiss I think I have ever taken.

"I've been, well, afraid to speak," I murmured into her hair, which held an upland sunniness. "Maybe I still am. Only I don't, don't, don't want to lose you, Jo."

Half crying, half laughing, she came back to my mouth. She didn't really know how, but she held herself hard against me, and I thought: *May she end up sleeping with me, already this night?*

No matter, either way. What does count is, the Wilderness Administration allows qualified husband-and-wife teams to live together on the job; and she's a ranger and I, being skilled in using monitoring devices, would be an acceptable research assistant.

And then-n-n:

I didn't know, I don't know to this day what went wrong. We'd had two or three more drinks, and a good deal of joyous tussling, and her clothes were partly off

her and dinner was beginning to scorch in the oven when

I was too hasty

she was too awkward and/or backward-holding, and I got impatient and she felt it.

I breathed out one of those special words which people say to each other only, and she being a bit terrified anyway decided it wasn't mere habit-accident but I was pretending she was Marie because in fact my eyes were shut

she wasn't as naive as she, quite innocently, had led me to believe, and in one of those moments which (contrary to fantasy) are forever coming upon lovers, asked herself, "Hey, what the hell is really going on?"

or whatever. It makes no difference. Suddenly she wanted to phone Marie.

"If, if, if things are as you say, Pete, she'll be glad to learn—"

"Wait a minute! Wait one damn minute! Don't you trust me?"

"Oh, Pete, darling, of course I do, but—"

"But nothing." I drew apart to register offense.

Instead of coming after me, she asked, as quietly as the night outside: "Don't you trust *me*?"

Never mind. A person can't answer a question like that. We both tried, and shouldn't have. All I truly remember is seeing her out the door. A smell of charred meat pursued us. Beyond the cabin, the air was cold and altogether pure, sky wild with stars, peaks aglow. I watched her stumble to her flutter. The galaxy lit her path. She cried the whole way. But she went.

However disappointed, I felt some relief, too. It would have been a shabby trick to play on Marie, who had considerable love invested in me. And our apartment is quite pleasant, once it's battened down against the sur-

roundings; I belong to the fortunate small minority. We had an appropriate reunion. She even babbled about applying for a childbearing permit. I kept enough sense to switch that kind of talk off immediately.

Next evening there was a rally which we couldn't well get out of attending. The commissioners may be right as far as most citizens go. "A sensiphone, regardless of how many circuits are tuned in, is no substitute for the physical togetherness of human beings uniting under their leaders for our glorious mass purposes." We, though, didn't get anything out of it except headaches, ears ringing from the cadenced cheers, lungs full of air that had passed through thousands of other lungs, and skins which felt greasy as well as gritty. Homebound, we encountered smog so thick it confused our vehicle. Thus we got stopped on the fringes of a riot and saw a machine gun cut a man in two before the militia let us move on. It was a huge relief to pass security check at our conurb and take a transporter which didn't fail even once, up and across to our own place.

There we shared a shower, using an extravagant percentage of our monthly water ration, and dried each other off, and I slipped into a robe and Marie into something filmy; we had a drink and a toke which Haydn lilted, and got relaxed to the point where she shook her long tresses over her shoulders and her whisper tickled my ear: "Aw, c'mon, hero, the computers've got to've edited your last year's coverage by now. I've looked forward all this while."

I thought fleetingly of Jo. Well, she wouldn't appear in a strictly wilderness-experience public-record documentary; and I myself was curious about what I had actually produced, and didn't think a revisit in an electronic dream would pain me, even this soon afterward.

I was wrong.

What hurt most was the shoddiness. Oh, yes, decent

reproduction of a primrose nodding in the breeze, a hawk a-swoop, spuming whiteness and earthquake rumble of a distant avalanche, fallen leaves brown and baking under the sun, their smell and crackle, the laughter of a gust which flirted with my hair, suppleness incarnate in a snake or a cougar, flamboyance at sunset and shyness at dawn—a competent show. Yet it wasn't real, it wasn't what I had loved.

Marie said, slowly, in the darkness where we sat, "You did better before. Kruger, Matto Grosso, Baikal, your earlier stays in this region—I almost felt I was at your side. You weren't a recorder there, you were an artist, a great artist. Why is this different?"

"I don't know," I mumbled. "My presentation is kind of mechanical, I admit. I suppose I was tired."

"In that case—" she sat very straight, half a meter from me, fingers gripped together—"you didn't have to stay on. You could have come home to me long before you did."

But I wasn't tired, rammed through my head. No, now is when I'm drained; then, there, life flowed into me.

That gentian Jo wanted to see . . . it grows where the land suddenly drops. Right at the cliff edge those flowers grow, oh, blue, blue, blue against grass green and daisy white and the strong gray of stone; a streamlet runs past, leaps downward, ringing, cold, tasting of glaciers, rocks, turf, the air which also blows everywhere around me, around the high and holy peaks beyond. . . .

"Lay off!" I yelled. My fist struck the chair arm. The fabric clung and cloyed. A shade calmer, I said, "Okay, maybe I got too taken up in the reality and lost the necessary degree of detachment." *I lie, Marie, I lie like Judas. My mind was never busier, planning how to use Jo and discard you.* "Darling, those sensies, I'll have nothing but them for the rest of my life." *And none of the gentians. I was too busy with my scheme to bother*

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with anything small and gentle and blue. "Isn't that penalty enough?"

"No. You did have the reality. And you did not bring it back." Her voice was like a wind across the snows of upland winter.

Another Cask of Wine

FRITZ LEIBER

We took the golden elevator up for 257 storeys. We have real skyscrapers these days, unlike those of the primitive 20th century.

He was tall, dark, and handsome. I was small, pale and squatty. What a pair!

We took the sidewalk fifty-seven blocks east. We have wide buildings these days.

We took the silver elevator down 357 storeys. He looked cool, man, but I knew different.

We walked—Ye Gods, the walking we did in this business!—fifty-seven blocks west.

I opened a platinum door and bowed his way to him. It was a really beautiful, large room though without windows (You've been counting, haven't you?).

I slammed the door, saying "Sorry, Montresor."

Unfortunately I opened, at this point, a door, and stepped in (being somewhat short-sighted), and fell into Hell, a very nasty place. Still, I'm sure I kept my directions. Amazing, somebody bitched me up!

Notes from Infinity

POUL ANDERSON is a careful craftsman, who needs time to work out the aspects of a story. Therefore he produces less than his readers could desire . . . but the reward always proves worth the wait.

E. MICHAEL BLAKE recently received his B.S. in Physics from the Illinois Institute of Technology, where he also worked in an s-f writer's workshop that was under the direction of Dr. Leon E. Stover. His main interest at present is in correcting the lack of s-f available as drama. *The Foreigner* is his first sale.

EDWARD BRYANT is one of the most successful products of the Clarion workshops in s-f writing; his stories have appeared in most of the original anthology series, as well as in many magazines. Perambulatory by nature, he fortunately manages to return often to his typewriter.

GRANT CARRINGTON is also a Clarion graduate, and is currently the Associate Editor of *Amazing Science Fiction* and *Fantastic*. Backgrounded in computers, he has passed his thirtieth birthday and therefore is no longer to be trusted.

G. C. EDMONDSON lives in San Diego, California, with his wife, a Yaqui Indian. He is the author of three s-f novels, the most recent of which, *CHAPAYECA*, was published by Doubleday & Co.

RON GOUART has created his own special universe, a place best known for the certain occurrence of the im-

probable. His latest novel, SHAGGY PLANET, will soon be published by Lancer.

ROBERT HOSKINS is general editor of Lancer's science fiction program, as well as an anthologist. *Infinity Four* is his eleventh published anthology of science fiction. He has authored a number of novels pseudonymously; the first to appear under his own name will be *The Shattered People*, to be published soon.

JOHN JAKES has been a full-time professional writer since the age of 18. He has also been (frequently concurrently) a full-time worker in advertising and a full-time enthusiast of little theatre. He wrote the book for a modern musical, *Dracula Baby*, which is currently available from the Dramatic Publishing Company and proving very popular on the high school circuit.

DEAN R. KOONTZ is currently involved in a number of hardcover projects which will limit severely his science fiction output. However, Lancer has just published his *Warlock*, and he is working on a comedic-suspense novel, *The Haunted Earth*, for publication next year.

FRITZ LEIBER makes his first appearance in the pages of *Infinity* with a trio of short-short stories that point up his constant interest a) cats, b) the arcane aspects of your everyday alien invader, and c) the future application of a former horror.

W. MACFARLANE is a farmer, a graduate from Northwestern University, a past president of chamber of commerce and school boards, and deplores labels, cubical or trapezoidal. He will take any side of a question—dichotomous thought a specialty. The s-f indices list two appearances in 1949, a third in 1952, and then beginning in 1967 an activity of several stories a year that hopefully will continue from now on.

Notes from Infinity

BARRY N. MALZBERG is contentious and opinionated, and not in the least ashamed to support his opinions loudly, in person and in print. Like a flint, he draws sparks from the readers: it is impossible to be neutral about a Malzberg story. The reader may not like a specific example, but he will most certainly react to the Malzbergian prodding in some way conducive to the clearing of lungs and/or thoughts.

WILLIAM F. NOLAN's *Space For Hire* (published by Lancer) was nominated as one of the five Best Original Paperback Mysteries of the year by the Mystery Writers of America—even though it is pure science-fiction. (The novel represents a rarely-seen cross of the two genres.) He is currently working on a sequel, *The Trouble With Space*, which promises to be equally delightful.

TOM PICKENS is a full-time freelance writer, but until recently almost all his efforts have been in the fields of advertising and public relations. *Ding Dong the Witch Is Well* is the first story he thought enough of to have appear under his own name, and his first sale to a science fiction market.

THOMAS N. SCORTIA, after a number of years as a consultant to industry, recently retired (although still very young) to the pleasures of full-time writing. His appearances have been infrequent, though his stories have been appearing in the s-f magazines since 1954; he promises that we will be encountering him on a more regular basis in the future.

ROBERT SILVERBERG continues . . . what else can be said of a man who manages to astonish with virtually every new story? If he should ever truly retire from writing, then it would seem that the publishing revolution (mentioned in the Introduction to this volume) had finally come to the ultimate and disastrous ending.

RON WALOTSKY, the cover artist for this volume, manages to combine a career in commercial illustration with another in fine art. The *New York Times*, recently reviewing a show of new artists in which he was a participant, selected him as the only one to specifically mention as an artist to watch.

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI's first story appeared in *Infinity One*; since then, he has expanded into most of the major markets, sold one novel to Ace Books, and is currently working on *Macrolife*, a 150,000 word novel for Charles Scribner's Sons. He also teaches an s-f course at Harpur College.

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